

# The Demolition





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## *India At The Crossroads*

**NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY**



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To  
The Gods Who Failed  
Or  
The Ones Who Died Young  
And Of Course

To  
Harsha



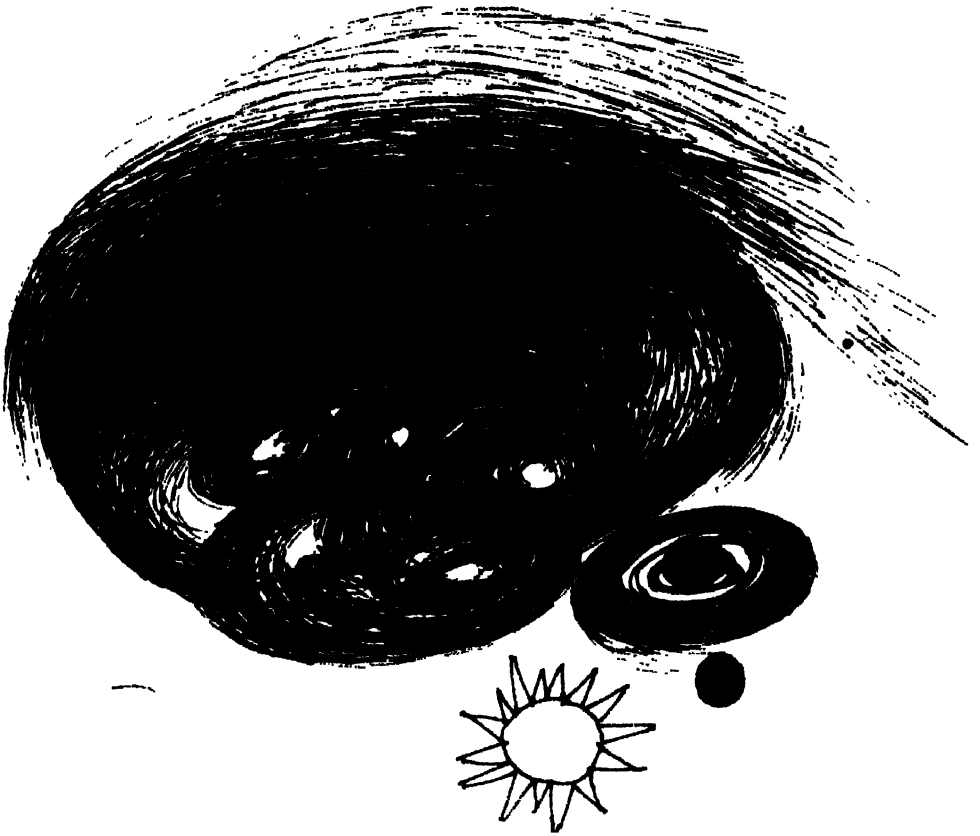
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## CHAPTER 1

# Prathamkāṇḍ





*"Then there was neither non-existent nor  
existent: there was no realm of air, no sky  
beyond it"...*

**From The Song of Creation, Rigveda**

**O**n Christmas Eve, 1992, as I stood opposite the 10,000-odd square feet plot of land in Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid once existed, I simultaneously went back into time and tried to step into the future. I recalled my first visit to the temple-town in 1986 shortly after a magistrate, K.M. Pandey, in the district headquarters of Faizabad, ordered unlocking of the gate of the mosque on February 1, and allowed Hindu devotees to worship the idols forcibly installed in the mosque way back in 1949. I also tried to visualise what the view would be like, a few years hence. I realised that it was no longer the question of what would be the nature and design of the structure that would come up in place of the demolished 465-year-old structure, but one about India's future, its people, and the relationship among them. At stake was the traditional nature of India --- as the world and citizens of the country have known it since its Independence.

Ever since public worship was allowed at the disputed shrine in 1986, India's peace has been shattered, with distinct battle lines drawn between the people of India. Blood has frequently spilled on the streets as Hindus and Muslims have repeatedly locked horns and fought pitched battles with the police either, looking the other way or, playing a partisan role in favour of the Hindus.

Several aspiring politicians now have a stranglehold on centrestage with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a marginal political party of yesteryears setting the national agenda since 1989. Values, which formed the cornerstone of beliefs for several generations of Indians, are being abandoned. There seems to be an intense struggle in the Indian heart and mind. This may not necessarily lead to a mad frenzy of communal conflict or, an immediate electoral sweep by the BJP, but the social attitude of the majority of Indians has changed beyond recognition.

The developments in India over the past few years are being keenly observed and monitored by the entire world, as they prepare to deal with the emerging political order in the country. The entire body-politic of India has undergone a dramatic transformation in the wake of the agitation for a Ram temple in Ayodhya, a small township in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in India. Nothing underlines the remodelling, now underway in the country, better than the changed skyline of Ayodhya. So much has happened in India in nine years since the agitation for a Ram temple was launched in 1984, that the present situation suggests the demolition of the Babri Masjid was not the end of a turbulent phase, but merely the beginning of yet another end. In fact, if one analyses the events in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 one cannot escape the feeling that something very fundamental to the history of India happened in that small town on that day.

But it is not that all that happened in Ayodhya was without a prelude. There had been enough portents of the likely shape of things to come, both in this temple town and in India. On several occasions warning bells were sounded in Ayodhya, but no one heeded them. Successive central governments first ignored the nascent threat posed by the demand for 'liberation' of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, and later tried to evade the snowballing crisis by a series of political manoeuvres, including forming an alliance with the BJP in the general election in 1989. But, all this appeared to be passe in Ayodhya on that foggy winter afternoon.

**All that mattered was the fact that the very foundations of India had been rudely shaken. It was now clear that the face of India was a changed one and the shape of things to come would be completely different from the past tradition. It was clear that intolerance was to be the new catchword...**

**While I stood on the rubble of the Babri Masjid, I recalled every flash-point in Ayodhya's history and the crucial dates of the agitation for the 'liberation' of the Ram Janmabhoomi: November 9, 1989 and October 30, 1990, the two dates on which the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) — the organisation spear-heading the agitation to change the meaning of nationalism — and its allies scheduled the programmes for shilanyas and kar seva, both of which played significant roles in toppling the central governments of the time. These were now little more than a part of the bizarre chain of events that were enacted in this sleepy little township with a population of less than 50,000. As I stood there that day, there were no full-throated slogans rending the air. Neither was there a trace of the 465-year-old mosque, nor any indication of a grand and imposing 270-ft-long and 126-ft-wide temple built with 212 pillars, each rising to a height of 132 feet, as was promised by the VHP. All that remained was a pile of rubble where the Babri Masjid once stood and a hastily erected structure of sorts. Scores of policemen from the Central Reserve Police Force wielded their guns. But there was little to protect...**

**Along with the physical nature of the small mound called Ramkot where the Babri Masjid was located, the entire township of Ayodhya had also changed drastically in the last seven years. Constituting a part of the Faizabad parliamentary constituency, this town had been so unconcerned with the agitation to convert India into a 'Hindu State', that the people of the town elected a communist party member to the Lok Sabha as late as 1989. But, the political and social mood in the temple town had undergone a sea change since then, after the leaders of the agitation gave a new thrust to their campaign. Nothing underlined this more**

starkly than the charred remains of more than 200 houses belonging to impoverished Muslims accounting for less than ten per cent of the town's population, and several partially demolished mosques in Ayodhya. The horror that was Ayodhya for several days in early December 1992 became more apparent when local residents gleefully took visitors around and showed them the evidence of *havan* (Hindu fire ritual) having been performed in several of the overrun mosques. All around there was evidence of an organised attempt to 'ethnically cleanse' the town. Earlier in 1990, there had been attacks on some Muslims in Ayodhya after the kar seva bid by the activists of the VHP and its allies. But, what made the difference now was the intensity of the anti-Muslim violence — nearly a score of people had been killed and property worth several lakh rupees looted or destroyed — and the fact that this time the marauding mobs had the active support of the citizens of the town.

When the majority of Indians first heard of the existence of the Babri Masjid and that there was a dispute over it, Ayodhya was a typical place of pilgrimage, with hundreds of temples and periodic fairs on important festivals when devotees flocked there in thousands. The town and its people sustained themselves by offerings made by visiting devotees, business generated during the fairs and annual grants by scions of former princely states. There has been no detailed survey on the number of temples in Ayodhya — even the private praying nook in houses located in Ayodhya is thrown open to devotees with the hope that there would be minor additions to the family coffers. Throughout the nineteenth century especially towards the end several princely states built *ashrams* in Ayodhya for people to come and stay during the festival seasons. Each one of them is also run as a temple now. With each prince adhering to the architectural style of his own state, Ayodhya has several beautiful buildings, each dating back nearly a hundred years. It is ironical that the fiercest Hindu-Muslim dispute in Indian history has been over one of the least aesthetically attractive structures in Ayodhya.

Before the dispute over the Babri Masjid and Ram Janmabhoomi gripped India in its stranglehold, Ayodhya had conjured up different images for different Indians. For the bulk of Hindus, having grown up on a diet of Ramayan stories passed on for generations by willing grandmothers, the town was considered holy. But Ayodhya had never evoked the kind of appeal that other places of Hindu pilgrimage like Varanasi and Haridwar did. People did not head for Ayodhya, in the twilight of their life as they did for the two other pilgrimage centres. But, for me, every visit to the town reminded me of my childhood. I remember Ayodhya as a town where monkeys were always on the prowl to grab anything from a hapless visitor. The train I took to go to Varanasi to visit my grandparents during my annual school vacations, would go past Ayodhya. Whenever the train approached Ayodhya station, people would frantically lower the shutters of their windows — in those days the windows of lower class compartments did not have grills — but the monkeys were ever hopeful of snatching something away from an unwary traveller.

I was acutely reminded of my childhood images in 1989 when, during a visit to Ayodhya, I was informed that the VHP was planning to raise a brigade of youngsters to lend muscle to the temple agitation. Towards this end, a special function called *Bajrang diksha* — or monkey initiation — was planned in July that year and that the youngsters were to be given charge of overseeing the arrival of the thousands of specially consecrated bricks that the VHP was collecting from several parts of the country. This marked the birth of the Bajrang Dal, named after Hanuman, the monkey ally of Ram in the epic poem, Ramayan. The attempt was clearly to use the symbol of a brave monkey willing to undertake any risk to help the mythological hero. By floating the Bajrang Dal, the leaders of the VHP were obviously hoping to instil in the youth the same die-hard attitude to demolish the Babri Masjid, build a new temple, and initiate the process of 'Hinduising' India.

Standing where the Babri Masjid once existed, I painfully recalled my boyhood impression of Ayodhya as a place where the monkeys were ever ready to snatch...

But Ayodhya was seldom the place where intolerance reigned supreme. People of both Ayodhya and the twin city of Faizabad, also the district headquarters, were least concerned with the havoc the dispute over the shrine had been creating in the country. On repeated occasions, residents said that while it was true that there was a dispute over the shrine, since the matter was being contested in the court by a few individuals and they were agreeable to law taking its own course. People categorically say that there had been no trouble in the twin towns even though the dispute had been pending in the local district court since December 1949. Communal harmony and cordial relations between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya are best exemplified in a temple called Sunder Bhavan. Situated at a stone's throw from Hanuman Garhi, one of the oldest temples of Ayodhya, the Sunder Bhavan Temple, with its idols of Ram and his wife Sita, had been managed by a Muslim, Munna Mian. Appointed for his honesty by Mahant Sunder Das, who built this temple shortly before India attained Independence in 1947, for close to four decades, the old Munna Mian, remained a devout Muslim, and had been a good manager of the temple. But suddenly, after the demolition, he found himself being hounded out by those agitating for a Hindu India who felt that there is no place for Muslims in Ayodhya.

Even in 1989, when activists of the VHP dug up the graveyard in front of the Babri Masjid to perform shilanyas — to lay the foundation of the proposed new temple (which they later claimed was not just a simple foundation stone, but the "basis of a Hindu Rashtra") — the people of the twin towns of Faizabad and Ayodhya were unimpressed. In fact, they responded by electing a communist member to the Lok Sabha, the lower House of Parliament comparable to the House of Commons, in the ensuing parliamentary election barely a fortnight later. But the

winds of change sweeping the country soon began to start making an impact on the residents in these two towns. A year later, Hindu citizens of these towns joined hands with the VHP activists, to collectively campaign for the construction of the proposed temple. In the next round of general elections, precipitated by the kar seva programme of October 1990, the electoral behaviour of Ayodhya had undergone a change: the new member of Parliament to represent the Faizabad constituency was a leader of the Bajrang Dal, admitted in the Bharatiya Janata Party shortly before the elections. But, even then the Hindus of both the towns did not turn hostile to the local Muslims, even though they ratified the demand of demolishing the mosque, and building a new temple. But all this had changed by December 1992, with hostility towards Muslims being the predominant sentiment in these two towns. Muslims felt more insecure than ever before, even more than at the time of the Partition in 1947, and there was evidence of a new found assertiveness among the Hindus. It seems nothing will satisfy the Hindu citizens more than seeing the BJP come to power at the Centre. Subsequent visits to Ayodhya further underlined that so much had changed in India, and so had Ayodhya...

If anyone had expected that with the demolition of the Babri Masjid the problem would be contained, as the bone of contention was no longer in existence, they were sadly mistaken. The recurring Hindu-Muslim clashes in several parts of the country, the mass endorsement of the frenzied action at Ayodhya, the meticulous political planning of the RSS and its affiliates in the aftermath of the demolition, and the bewildered and fragmented response of the Union government and other political parties not wedded to the concept of a Hindu India, is clear for all to see. There are also indications of the emergence of Islamic terrorism in India. For the first time, the myth of Hindu society being a tolerant one is being questioned.

The triumph of the Hindutva idea is for all to see. This has naturally made a large number of Hindus in the country and

even those living abroad as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) more buoyant than ever before. For the first time, Hindus have started articulating their views as Hindus and questions are openly posed about several characteristics of Muslims. There might be countless studies to counter the claims, but the average Hindu fed by the publicists of the Hindutva idea will argue that Muslims are poor because they breed more, marry many more times, and have been consistently pampered in all walks of life. In private meetings, many Hindus openly say that the sham has to end and that the Muslims must be taught to live in India according to the dictates of the majority community.

For the first time in India, these views are being expressed by Hindus from all sections of society, cutting across class lines. While it is true that there are several Hindus who do not subscribe to such a viewpoint and are in open opposition to the proponents of Hindutva, they are not united. In fact, India is today witnessing a new assertive Hindu who could not care much about people with whom they have participated in the making of India's modern history. Predictably, the leaders of the Hindutva parties analyse the present situation as a case of a Hindu society in resurgence, but a non-partisan analysis of the situation reveals it is not the case of a resurgent society marching towards rectifying historical wrongs. Rather, the Ayodhya movement has just resuscitated the Hindus as a community that is now shaping itself as an electoral vote bank to the advantage of the BJP. The argument of the Hindutva leaders has been accepted by the majority of Hindus: If most political parties can treat minorities as a vote bank, what is the harm if the BJP claims that its primary duty is to safeguard the interests of the Hindus and in return get electoral support?

The triumph of the Hindutva idea is evident for all to see as is the stark inability of non-Hindutva political parties and social groups to offer an alternative to the process now under way in India. For the past decade there have been several changes both at the intellectual level and at the level of grassroot politics, but



since the initial trends were ignored and it now appears that there is no escape from the vice-like grip the Hindutva idea has on the minds of a large number of Indians. This phenomenon extends beyond the realm of high politics and electoral behaviour and has taken root in the everyday social level. It is best marked by the presence of aggressive graffiti on walls in almost every part of the country and the visible display of symbols that have come to be identified with the Hindutva idea. This idea today has a total sway over popular culture and is steadily pervading newer areas.

What India is witnessing is not just the end of a phase of post-Independence history, but the beginning of a new phase in its history. Indian polity, which has greatly modelled itself on the Western liberal democratic system, is poised to undergo a sea change as the influence of the Hindutva idea is unlikely to be undermined in the near future. This naturally would have a great bearing on global politics, primarily as the Western world is faced with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the suggestion that in its search for an alternate pole to vent its 'hate propaganda' the Western countries would seek to project the 'cemented Islamic world' as the real threat to Western liberal democracy. In such a situation, would a Hindu India be an ally of the West? While there are arguments that the events following the demolition of the Babri Masjid are of a transitory nature and that India would soon return to its tranquil ways, and that the BJP would soon reach a plateau, there are also powerful reasons to the contrary to suggest that the Hindutva idea will be the cornerstone of future governance in the country.

It is clear that Hindutva is yet another Asian alternative to Western liberalism, on which the Nehruvian model was based. Some aspects of the system were dismantled by the present Union government when, after assuming office in June 1991, it proceeded with a series of economic alterations that have greatly remodelled the nature of Indian economy. In fact, the economic changes in India in the last two years seems to have kept pace

with the collapse of socialism elsewhere. However, the parameters of Western liberalism were never violated in India till the advent of Hindutva.

What makes the situation in India more interesting is that the Hindutva idea, unlike earlier alternatives to Western liberalism, has no real difference in its economic approach. Since the Hindutva field of control is restricted to the frontiers of the country, it does not threaten, at least for the moment, the sway of the rejuvenated Western liberalism. The likely attitude of Western liberals towards Hindutva will be in direct contrast to their postures towards the Islamic world. With the advent of a unipolar world, the West has to project a 'bogey' for sustenance within its own political order, and that can come from harping on the old days of the 'Holy Wars' when Christianity and Islam were at loggerheads. And, in such a situation, a Hindu India could be a potential ally provided it gives a portion of the economic cake to the Western nations.

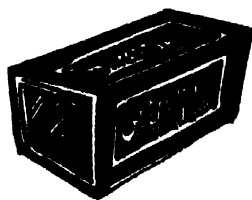
Hindutva loyalists feel that they have won the day and are poised for several more victorious bouts. But, there are basic questions that have come to the fore. Having won the day, where do we go? What is the shape of things to come? How long can the majority of this country be made to feast on a staple diet of religious fervour and hatred towards the minorities, instead of actual calories that would give strength to both body and soul? Besides the social order, how are other vital areas like education, health, and science to be structured? Will there be a return to the old order when only those born into a privileged family are allowed access to the temples of learning and ensured a safe life? What is to be the fate of the 12 million-odd Muslims living in the country? The proponents of Hindutva have made it clear that if the Muslims wish to continue living in India, they have to conform to the beliefs of the majority Hindus, and revere all symbols and gods of the Hindu pantheon. The problems are manifold and simplistic assertions that, with the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Muslims of the country have been taught

a lesson, will not pave the way towards a stronger nation.

The ringside view of the flow of events in the past decade has made me acutely conscious of the changing face of India. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was, to me, a very unfortunate development because it was a grotesque end to a fierce ideological battle. Being a non-Muslim and an agnostic of sorts, the decrepit old structure never evoked any religious emotions in me. It also did not evoke any aesthetic sentiment. But, for me, it was always the symbol of something abstract. I had always likened the Babri Masjid to a structure that embodied the abstract goal that India had to achieve. Throughout the past decade which culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the ideological struggle centring around the structure had two warring forces. On one side, were the votaries of the Hindutva idea and, on the other, 'romantics' who were still willing to stake their future for the abstract Indian nation that they were committed to. Ironically, in this losing battle for the 'abstractionists,' the Indian State remained a passive onlooker. It has been apparent, on several occasions, that the State in India believes in the viewpoint of the Hindutva leaders, but does not have the courage to say so in explicit terms.

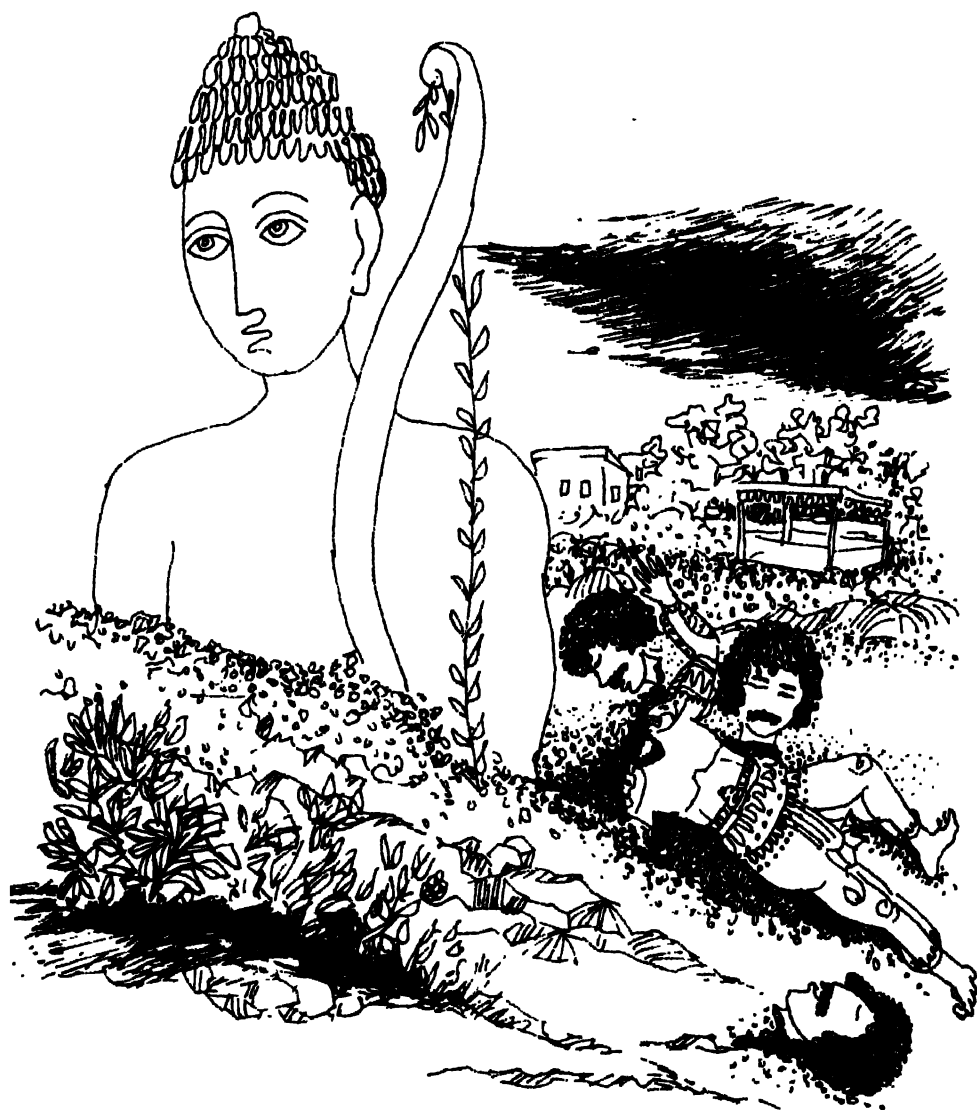
When I returned to Ayodhya on February 6, 1993, just two months after the tumultuous day in the temple town, I felt nostalgic. I also had a feeling of *deja vu*. None of the Hindus that I spoke to in the town were looking behind, but everyone was attempting to foresee the future. The question uppermost in the minds of people was whether the BJP would come to power and when. But, for me, the past was still important as it indicated the nature of the future. The political forces, now on the upswing in the country, have clear cut answers for everything. There is a great amount of certainty in each of the assertions of the leaders of tomorrow. There is no longer the question of chasing a fantasy for the nation. Rather, everything has been predetermined. The people of this country have simply one history and one tradition and anyone disagreeing with the official viewpoint will have

little space in the nation of tomorrow. In a way, the demolition of the Babri Masjid has led to the demise of romanticism from the political theatre of the country. And I shall remember with fondness this romanticism that I grew up with...



## CHAPTER 2

# Rāmkaṇḍ



*By killing Ravan  
I have avenged the insult  
He did to my honour.  
This war, this struggle,  
Was not for your sake.  
I did what I did  
To wipe out the shame  
On my family name  
And now, with rumours  
Everywhere floating,  
Your presence hurts  
I give you leave  
I have no more need of you...*

#### **Ram to Sita in the Ramayan's Yudhkand**

**R**am, the prince-protagonist of the epic poem Ramayan, whose name has been craftily utilised by the advocates of the Hindutva idea to propel themselves onto the centrestage of the Indian political theatre, has conjured up different images for Hindus from diverse backgrounds. For a large number, he is revered for the nobility of his character, a trait that has given the mythological character the common title of *maryada purushottam*, the epitome of virtue. Unlike several other mythological characters, people never harp on the anomalies in Ram's character, and the mythological hero like many other heroes is not seen to have ever done anything wrong. The characterisation of Ram in the

Ramayan, the epic from which the bulk of contemporary images of the hero are drawn, is in complete contrast to the leading characters of the other equally important Hindu epic, the Mahabharat, where all eminent men and women are shown to be more human than Ram, in so far as they are prone to simple mistakes made by human beings, while each of Ram's actions are measured and aberrations justified.

Ram thus was characterised as the perfect human being and as time flowed by after the composition of the Ramayan nearly two thousand years ago, he has come to be regarded both as a god — he is considered an avatar of Vishnu — as well as a folk hero in large parts of northern India. Ram's travails and tales of his exploits have become popular through a series of rituals and festivals. But, there are also large sections of Hindu society where Ram is regarded merely as a member of the Hindu pantheon of gods, and not an embodiment of Hindu culture.

However, the superhuman characteristics of Ram's character came in handy for the ideologues of the Hindutva movement. From a simple god of the Hindu pantheon, he is now projected to be a symbol of the Indian national identity. Lal Krishna Advani, president of the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose supporters shrewdly managed to get him voted as BBC's Man of the Year 1990 (the orchestrated campaign was discovered by the Corporation and his name subsequently dropped), put forth his favourite argument during his nation-wide campaign trip — euphemistically called Rath Yatra — that year. (Advani's actual name however is Lal Kishinchand Advani, but his party colleagues insist on using Krishna as it gives him a mythological halo. They say that it is a matter of 'faith' that he is Krishna to them. Hereafter he will named as Advani is popularly called.) In speech after speech at wayside gatherings, where his cavalcade led by a vehicle decorated like the mythological chariot stopped, he espoused that Ram was not just a god, but was the embodiment of the national character of India. He would then go on to elaborate that his party had adopted the agitation for the Ram



temple at Ayodhya, because the successful end of the campaign would lead to the reassertion of the Indian identity. It goes without saying that this identity would be primarily Hindu because as Advani has said on several occasions, "India is primarily Hindu."

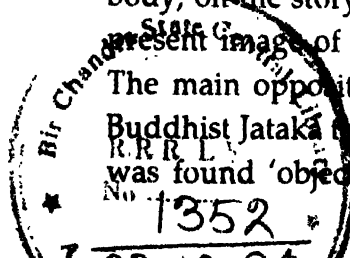
This argument found many takers in the years between the Rath Yatra and the demolition of the Babri Masjid and even afterwards. While in the earlier phase, the main slogans adopted by the agitators focussed only on the demand for building the temple in place of the mosque, in the latter phase of the campaign, a common graffiti was *Ram drohi, rashtra drohi* (Ram's traitor is the nation's traitor). This clearly illustrated that for the advocates of Hindutva, any citizen of the country who ranged against the manner in which they were agitating for the Ram temple, had little future in an India, governed by the RSS clan. When this slogan appeared, it was clear that Hindutva advocates were casting their nets much wider than before in an effort to enlist the support of new social groups that had so far remained aloof from the agitation. It was also a belated attempt to change the character of the agitation from one restricted to just the 'restoration' of a temple, to a wider ideological campaign that would dramatically alter the face of Indian polity.

There have been other arguments which have sought to impress that unless Ram has the pride of place in India, the nation will stagnate and will not have the necessary dynamism to overcome global challenges.<sup>1</sup> The new slogans and their acceptance by the Hindutva converts amply underscore the success of Hindutva ideologues in equating a mythological character with the soul of a modern nation state. While the name of Ram was invoked during India's Freedom Struggle, this is the first instance of a consistent campaign for the acceptance of the mythological character by all wishing to live in India. The advocates of Hindutva have made it clear that they will not be satisfied if Ram is merely respected; he must be given a pristine place, second to none, in the consciousness of every Indian, and anyone who

refuses to comply has no right to associate himself with the nation. In the span of nine years since the agitation for building a Ram temple at Ayodhya was launched, this mythological character has been successfully pitchforked into a position where the degree of reverence to him will be the yardstick for measuring the patriotic fervour of each Indian. Consequently, in the emerging political scenario in India, failure to satisfy the advocates of the Hindutva idea regarding one's devotion and reverence to Ram would have clear repercussions for the individual.

### Ram's Story

Ram's story is not as linear as the champions of Hindutva have made it out to be. Like any other mythological character, Ram's personality has been continually developing with each age adding something to the original. The images that Ram now evokes in the minds of people is a far cry from those that can be conjured from the epic when it was first composed. Just as the character of Ram has undergone a change since then, there have also been many interpolations into the story, and several versions of the original poem have been composed in various languages, both in India and abroad. The proponents of Hindutva have also made certain alterations to the core of the epic and, for the moment, these additions and interpretations are of primary importance, the original character of the epic having lost its relevance, especially over the past decade. The Ramayan, as interpreted and publicised by the promoters of the Hindutva idea, has now assumed a greater significance than the original. This was most evident in August 1993, when Hindutva advocates objected to an exhibition produced by SAHMAT, a cultural body, on the story of Ram. The exhibition emphasised that the present image of Ram did not stem from a singular tradition. The main opposition was to a panel that showed that in one Buddhist Jataka tale, Ram and Sita were brother and sister. This was found 'objectionable' and the advocates of the Hindutva



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idea successfully stopped the exhibition by getting the Union government, the sponsor of the show, to order its closure.

In more ways than one, the Ramayan is a simple story of Ram, a prince, Sita, his wife, Lakshman, his brother, and their adventures and escapades when they are banished to the forest by a cunning stepmother. Valour, duty and love are the basic moral messages in the story. Written in the form of a long epic poem, the bulk of its composition is in the traditional *shloka* metre, and the narratives range from an account of the court of Raja Dashrath, Ram's father, the meanderings of the trio in the forests and their interaction with ascetics and demons, the resulting battle with the demon king Ravan, and the victorious return of the trio to the capital city of Ayodhya after the rescue of Sita from Ravan.

Hindu tradition has it that the original version of the epic poem was composed by Valmiki, a sage. In later centuries, however, as the tales from the Ramayan were orally passed on from generation to generation, several additions were made to Valmiki's original. The version of the Valmiki Ramayan, that exists today was composed and written between several centuries — probably between the fifth century B.C. and the third century A.D.<sup>2</sup> This version is now divided into seven books, called *kandas* (episodes). They comprise between 66 and 116 *sargas* or chapters that, scholars of ancient Hindu texts opine, helps to determine the innumerable stages of its development through the centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The first book of the original epic, Ayodhyakand, is now the second book of the existing version.<sup>4</sup> The first book, now *Balkand*, is an obvious, later-day interpolation to highlight the divinity of Ram. In Ayodhyakand the readers are introduced to Dashrath, his three wives — Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra; the four sons — Ram, born to the first wife, Kaushalya, Bharat to Kaikeyi, and Lakshman and Shatrughna to Sumitra. The story, as it unfolds, has the aging king nominating Ram to the throne. Kaikeyi objects to this decision and uses an earlier blind promise made by Dashrath to have Ram banished to the forests for fourteen years. This

ensures that the throne goes to Bharat. The dutiful Ram, though seeing through the machinations of his step mother, leaves the capital with his wife and brother, Lakshman, even as they are followed by throngs of citizens. The aging king dies, Bharat is hastily summoned back to the capital and, after realising the ploy of his mother, goes to the forest to persuade Ram to come back. He fails in his mission, but manages to return from Chitrakoot, where the trio live during the period of banishment, with the wooden sandals of his elder brother. To mark his authority, Bharat chooses not to govern the kingdom from the capital of Ayodhya, but instead bases himself at nearby Nandigram, and declares that he is merely Ram's regent. Ayodhyakand ends with Ram deciding to leave Chitrakoot for a remoter part of the forest.

Aranyakand, or the Forest Episode, is the next book and it chronicles the travails of the trio in the dense forests and their various experiences that end with the abduction of Sita. In the forest, the trio not only meet ascetics, but also have altercations with demons. This forces Ram to don the mantle of a perfect *kshatriya* warrior, even though he has resolved to live the life of an ascetic. These passages are used to highlight Ram's commitment to his duty as a member of the princely caste at the expense of his resolutions, which provides the basis for his later image as a benevolent protector. The wanderings in the forest account for nearly ten of the fourteen years of exile. Among various sages that Ram meets, is Agastya, who gives his divine weapons in return for Ram's pledge to build a hermitage at nearby Panchvati. The significance of this meeting is evident much later in the epic when Ram has to use of these divine weapons to kill Ravan. While in the forest, trouble comes their way in the form of Surpanakha, a woman demon, who makes amorous advances towards the brothers and, on being rejected, attacks Sita. This forces Lakshman to mutilate Surpanakha, who approaches her demon brothers to take revenge. When the lesser demons fail to cause any harm to the trio, Surpanakha calls on another brother, Ravan, the king of Lanka. Ravan abducts Sita and the episode

ends with the brothers making their way to the Vanar (monkey) kingdom to look for allies in their battle against Ravan.

The next book is called Kishkindakand for it narrates the events in the city of Kishkinda, the capital of the Vanar kingdom. Ram forges an alliance with a monkey prince, Sugriv, and helps him get the kingdom back from his brother Vali by striking him from behind — an act for which Ram is reproached by the dying Vali. Meanwhile, the search for Sita continues and armies of the Vanars are sent off in different directions. While most of the armies return, Hanuman, the trusted Vanar ally of Ram, learns that Sita is in the island of Lanka and decides to leap over the sea to find her.

Sundarkand, the next book, has a long account of Lanka's beauty, where Hanuman lands after his jump over the sea. He wanders about the city unnoticed and eventually discovers Sita in a grove. He presents himself to her and shows Ram's ring as a mark of identification. However, Sita refuses to escape with Hanuman and tells him that she would prefer to be rescued by Ram personally. Hanuman returns to his kingdom but not before indulging in wanton destruction of Lanka. Hanuman's act is later compared by leaders of the RSS clan with the demolition of the Babri Masjid, hereby underlining how mythology has been skillfully used by the votaries of the Hindutva idea.

The narrative content of Yudhkand, the next book, is martial in character. There are details of Ram's preparation for the assault on Lanka, the ensuing battle and the final duel between Ravan and Ram. The duel ends with Ravan's death as Ram invokes divine powers, and the subsequent installation of Ravan's virtuous brother Vibhishan on the throne of Lanka, and Sita's liberation.

The story, so far, is in keeping with the classical plot of a good and virtuous prince, his loving wife and devoted brothers, a scheming stepmother, a villainous king kidnapping the wife to make her his wife, her spurning his advances, the prince entering into a battle for his beloved, and the subsequent victory of the

virtuous prince. Composed aesthetically, the epic poem talks of the virtues of honest living and has several moral lessons like other epics in various parts of the world. But like popular stories all over the world, the Valmiki Ramayan has also not lacked sequels, each age making certain interpolations and changes depending on the values of the time.

### **The Epic Starts Changing**

In fact, there is no reason to suppose that the original story, as composed by Valmiki, did not end on the happy note of Ram uniting with Sita, and the trio returning triumphantly to Ayodhya with Ram taking charge from Bharat and having a good tenure as the king. However, even in the edition now extant and perceived to be the true account of Ram's travails, there are accounts of Ram doubling the virtue of Sita and his assertions that he fought the battle to vindicate his kshatriya valour and not out of love for her. This forces Sita to undergo the torture of the fire ordeal, and the gods appear and inform Ram that he is Vishnu-incarnate. The accounts become more fantastical as Agni, the god of fire, appears to hand back Sita, Dashrath makes an appearance to bless his son, and Ram requests the gods to restore to life all the Vanars who died fighting his battle.

There is no reason to disbelieve that all these episodes, bordering on the fantastic, are flights of fancy of latter-day interpolators, and not Valmiki's contribution to the epic. They have clearly been added to the original as the need to spread the myth of Ram being a Vishnu-incarnate arose with the passage of time.

This is also probably true of the first and the last book of the popular edition of the Ramayan that is available now. The Balkand and Uttarakand have been regarded by scholars as the handiwork of latter-day interpolators as there are not only discrepancies in style but also contradictions in the core of the epic poem.<sup>5</sup> The majority of the accounts in the latter-day versions stress the divine character of Ram and his consort. In Balkand,

the additions narrate Ram's birth, his youthful exploits and marriage, a large number of the episodes being fanciful flights of imaginative interpolators. Even the birth of the four brothers is explained in miraculous terms: Dashrath is childless and stages a ritualistic *yagna* that moves the gods to fulfil his wish; the gods request Vishnu to become an incarnate and destroy Ravan; Sita's birth is described in miraculous terms; and Ram is able to marry her only after performing the superhuman task of breaking Shiva's bow.

The evidence of latter-day interpolations is clearer in the seventh book, Uttarakand (the book of Further Exploits), for even though it is set in Ayodhya after the return of Ram, nearly the first third of the book details the misdeeds of Ravan before his battle with Ram. This appears to have been added to the original with the purpose of negating allegations that Ram has acted against the grain of *dharma* by killing a brave king. The rest of the seventh book is an account of Sita being banished from the kingdom following gossip about her virtue when she was a captive of Ravan. Sita takes refuge in Valmiki's hermitage (this is the first time that Valmiki enters the narrative) and gives birth to twin sons who are later recognised when they are heard narrating and singing the story of Ram. By this time, the story of Ram had already become part of folklore, a fact which lends weight to the argument that the book was a later interpolation. Sita is soon recalled, but after having undergone several humiliations calls upon 'Mother Earth' to swallow her and Ram is left grieving for his wife. But he continues his long reign which ends only when Lakshman dies. Ram decides to bequeath the empire to his twin sons and proceeds towards heaven with Bharat and Shatrughna, by immolating himself on the banks of the river Saryu. The fact that the first and last books of the present version of the Ramayan have been interpolated to stress the divinity of Ram has been established by several scholars. One of them contends:

"Ram's deification and identification with Vishnu are constantly present in the mind of the poet of the first and the last

books. But in the five genuine books, apart from a few interpolated passages, this concept is absent and, by contrast, Ram is thoroughly human. Such a transformation of Ram's character could only have taken place over a long span of time".<sup>6</sup>

Valmiki's original has been subject to new interpretations and interpolations for close to two thousand years, the most recent instance being in 1988 when a leading film producer from Bombay, Ramanand Sagar, was given a chance to present the epic poem in the form of a television serial. It was a "culmination of the trend" that started with the rise of cinema and "mythological films made on the Ramayan".<sup>7</sup> The serial, made in the traditional soapopera style, contributed greatly in popularising the myths surrounding Ram and subsequently aided the advocates of the Hindutva idea. The serial virtually grounded the nation every Sunday morning, when it was telecast. It had its share of interpretations, primarily thanks to modern technology, and predictably dwelt more on the fantastical aspects of the version of the Ramayan as known today, leaving out the core of the original for linking the narrative from one episode to another. It has been contended that Sagar's version of the Ramayan was a pop version of Valmiki's epic and would be the "reigning literature" if the RSS clan comes to power in India.<sup>8</sup> The serial, telecast on the state television, (at that time the state had a monopoly on the audio-visual medium) also had its share of controversies. While a section of the intelligentsia argued that state television should not be used to popularise an essentially religious myth, purists felt that the producers of the television serial were taking too many liberties with both the Valmiki Ramayan as well as the popular Ram Charit Manas, composed by the medieval Bhakti poet Tulsidas. However, the controversies notwithstanding, the serial had an unprecedented run on television. By the time the serial ended, a majority of Indians had been fed recycled, mythical accounts of Ram's exploits.

By taking liberties with the Valmiki Ramayan and Tulsidas' Ram Charit Manas, Sagar adhered to the conventional pattern



of the growth of Hindu mythology. The television serial, in fact, became a part of the bardic tradition that has added to the core of the mythical stories.

Besides the Ramayan, the Mahabharat, the other epic which has traditionally contributed to the building of a typical Hindu psyche, soon followed on the small screen mounted in a similar manner. The two epics have had a symbiotic relationship from the time they were composed in the first millennium B.C., and the trend continued in the 1980s. It was not just the question of the Mahabharat following the Ramayan on television, but the second epic serial was also neatly dovetailed into the political theatre of India: After the agitation for the 'restoration' of the birthplace of Ram gained ground, the proponents of Hindutva would launch a similar agitation for the 'birthplace' of Krishna, the spiritual hero of the Mahabharat.

The second serial was produced by B.R. Chopra, another big producer from Bombay in a more grandiose manner. The serial, also in the soapopera style, once again grounded the entire nation, even cigarette vendors would down the shutters, and led to popularising several forgotten beliefs greatly aiding the proponents of the Hindutva idea. At a time when the two serials were at the zenith of their popularity, hospitals in several parts of the country recorded an alarming rise in the number of injuries to children with makeshift arrows, shot from hastily strung bows. They were getting injured in battle games played by children after seeing the warfare on the small screen. Even though there has been no definitive survey of the extent of 'Hinduisation' of the average Indian mind due to the two television serials, the popularity ratings must have some bearing on the spurt of support for the Hindutva idea. The Congress government of the time, headed by Rajiv Gandhi, had contributed immensely to the spread of Hindutva by deciding to screen the two serials, backed by adequate corporate sponsorship, at prime time on Sunday morning. However, when criticism at the government decision mounted, the Indian state

hastily cleared similar programmes on other religions, but they never acquired the kind of popularity of these two serials.

That the Mahabharat followed the Ramayan on television is in keeping with the fact that the contemporary version of the Mahabharat has a voluminous section — the Ramopakhyana — that summarises the Ram legend in both the human and divine forms, and thus suggests that the Mahabharat got its present shape only after the popularisation of the Ram legend.<sup>9</sup> Even though the commonly accepted view is that the Mahabharat is older than the Ramayan, the apparent contradiction arises from the fact that the original Ramayan was composed over a much shorter period than the Mahabharat. The latter therefore has more substantial interpolations and expansions than the Ramayan. This is the reason why there are references to the Ramayan in the Mahabharat and not vice versa. But there are indications that the latter-day interpolators of the epics were familiar with both. This becomes most apparent by a linguistic comparison of the two epics. A detailed analysis shows that the “majority of the proverbs found in the Ramayan are also found in the Mahabharat and about a fifth of the similes are common to both,”<sup>10</sup> highlighting the rich common tradition from which the two epics evolved. The analysis concludes: “It is clear that the poets of the later parts of the Ramayan were intimately acquainted with the Mahabharat in something like its present form, whereas, Valmiki was not.”<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that the two epics have grown from the basic kernel left behind by the original composers. Evolving over the centuries primarily through the bardic tradition, the epic poems — primarily highlighting the valour of the protagonist and other main characters — were passed from generation to generation, first by the oral tradition and later in the written form. In a way, Ramanand Sagar and B.R. Chopra were part of the same bardic tradition and when they made their television serials and opted to include only sections underlying the divinity of the characters from the epics.

## **Ram Evolves As God**

To understand the omnipresence of Ram in the present political theatre of India, it is important to analyse the evolution of Ram from an ordinary epic hero to an incarnate of Vishnu and then as a 'symbol of national identity' as argued by the proponents of the Hindutva idea. But, it has to be kept in mind that all the epic heroes, ranging from Ram to Krishna of the Mahabharat were slowly attributed with divinity not only because of the bardic tradition. It must be remembered that these epics, when originally written and composed, were devoid of any religious connotation. Such a revision came about only with the revival of the Brahminical order in Hindu society. As Brahmins sought to have a stranglehold on Hindu society, all the epics came to be used by them as religious texts, because the heroes were powerful symbols that could be utilised to further their upper caste interests. Many of the interpolations were clearly at the behest of the leaders of the Brahminical order: the most famous and well-known case being that of the Bhagvad Gita in the Mahabharat — the long sermon of Krishna to Arjun before the start of the epic battle — which was not a part of the original version. The link between this Brahminical tradition and the RSS clan is underlined by the fact that the Babri Masjid was demolished on the day considered to be the anniversary of Krishna's sermon to Arjun.

The attribution of divinity to the characters of the epic heroes also corresponded to other significant changes in the Hindu pantheon of gods. While the main Hindu gods at the time of the origin of the two epics were Indra and Brahma, by the time the Brahminical order was working towards cementing the divine character of the epic heroes, the main gods had become Vishnu and Shiva. This was necessitated for several reasons, the most important being the declining image of Indra from his pre-eminent position because of his moral degradation which became worse with every passing Purana that was written. Thus

while in the early stages of the spread of the Ramayan, Ram was likened (not considered an incarnate) to Indra, by the time the Ramayan established itself as a religious text in the medieval period, the epic hero was not only compared to Vishnu, but was also considered his incarnate. By this time, the avatar doctrine had been firmly established in the logic of Hindu philosophy.

Hence, the present version of the Valmiki Ramayan that is kept in the average Hindu household and read during religious rituals, has little bearing on the epic as composed by the sage. But the expanded version did not develop overnight. Additions have continued since the time when it started becoming a popular tale and later writers chose different sections to expand on. Clearly the development of the epic has taken place in several stages, with each stage corresponding to the changes taking place in Hindu society, taking into account the political changes in the region where the epic was being expanded. Given the nature of the epic, the Ramayan has been studied exhaustively by several scholars and the evolution of the story has been detailed with great precision. One postulation has categorised the present day version of Valmiki Ramayan as having evolved in at least five distinct phases and also alluded to the period when the expansion took place.<sup>12</sup>

The first stage is undoubtedly the time when Valmiki composed the majority of the existing versions of the five books from Ayodhyakand to Yudhkand. This accounts for more than 37 per cent of the existing Valmiki Ramayan, which was orally passed from the fifth to the fourth centuries B.C. In the second stage of the Ramayan's evolution, starting from the third century B.C. and continuing till the first century A.D., the expansion of the epic is confined to the existing books; while in the third stage, between the first and third centuries A.D., the main development of the epic is in the addition of the first and last books: Balkand and Uttarakand. These two books now account for nearly 25 per cent of the present version of the epic. The fourth stage of the Ramayan's development is spaced out between the fourth and

the twelfth centuries A.D., and both in this phase and in the next, rather than additions in the form of books, alterations and additions are made to the version existing at the time. The fifth and the final stage of the Ramayan's expansion started after the twelfth century.

An analysis of the *shlokas* composed in various phases of the development of the Ramayan, presents interesting conclusions. In the first stage, the epic is primarily martial in character and the protagonist is a noble hero, a fact that becomes clear when Ram says that even his future is determined by fate. The pantheon of gods is more Vedic than Puranic at this stage, and throughout the first and the second stage, both Ram and Lakshman are compared to Indra, Brahma and other symbolic gods like Vayu, Agni, and Marut. But, the situation alters dramatically in the third stage with the inclusion of the Balkand and the Uttarakand incorporated into the existing version to stress Ram's divinity and initiate the transformation of the epic from a simple narrative to a complex religious text. By this time, the moral degradation of Indra had already started appearing in various religious and mythological scripts of the time, which is why Ram can no longer continue to be compared to Indra. At the same time, Vishnu and Shiva started emerging as the main gods of the Hindu pantheon, and by the time the epic goes into its fourth stage of development, the two gods have completely displaced Indra and Brahma from the altar. This is also the time when some hostilities had become visible between the followers of Shiva and those of Vishnu.

As the epic develops through the centuries, the social structure also moves from the Vedic to the Puranic. The caste system emerges by the fourth stage of the epic's development and the four *varnas* or castes are clearly spelt out. The attitude towards women also undergoes a change and the emphasis is more on subservience to the husband and chastity. A woman is also frequently seen — by the third stage — as seductress, and by the end of the fourth stage, there is a further decline in the status of

women: The wife has no identity of her own, but is only of ornamental value to the husband while in public; widowhood is considered inauspicious, with occasional references to the practice of Sati; and women are now also expected to eat after the men folk of the family. The change in attitude towards women in society corresponds to the time when interpolations are made in the Ramayan about Ram doubting Sita's chastity after the death of Ravan, and even later when the gossip mill in Ayodhya forces Ram to banish Sita to Valmiki's hermitage. There are other social changes also that are clearly indicative of the changing value system and the growing influence of the Brahminical order: there is a shift from meat eating to cereals; deployment of magical and divine weapons becomes more common; there is an increased presence of religious images, pilgrimages, and places of worship; the lower castes slowly come to be despised and confined to the background. But, in spite of such significant changes, the Ramayan still does not have a complete sway over the Hindu mind and Ram does not emerge as the revered god that he is today till well past the sixteenth century. In fact, for a major part of the medieval period, Shaivism is much more prevalent than Vaishnavism and even among followers of Vishnu, there is no instance of Ram being considered a god. All such changes in the characterisation of Ram comes much later. The main person responsible for this emergence of Ram in the pantheon of gods was the medieval Bhakti poet, Goswami Tulsidas, who composed his version of the Ramayan, Ram Charit Manas, in the closing decades of the sixteenth century when he lived in Ayodhya. Prior to this, the Ram story had come to have so much sway on Indian mind that there were even Buddhist and Jain versions of the story. The versions made significant departures from the story and have now become controversial because the Hindutva advocates want the Ramayan to be seen as having stemmed from a singular tradition.

But, before Tulsidas came to sing and later compose his version of the epic, there were several versions in various languages

that led to the popularisation of the Ram legend. That the nobility of Ram's character had a stirring effect on several writers can be gauged by the fact that there are versions of the Ramayan in several other Asian languages also.

By the time the Ramayan was in its third stage of development, not only were various bardic interpolators actively expanding the epic, but there were also several other writers who were using both the existing version as the base for their independent creations, as well as translating Valmiki's original into other languages. As the legendary story of Ram spread far and wide in India, and in other parts of Asia through itinerants, the urge to take the story of the legendary prince among their people was irresistible for several writers.

Among the first such exercises is the Ramopakhyana of the Mahabharat. As mentioned earlier, this section of the larger epic portrays Ram as an outstanding person, but still retains the human characteristics in his portrayal.<sup>13</sup> This is the extent to which Ram's character had evolved by the end of the second stage of the Ramayan's development, and the basic purpose of including Ramopakhyana in the Mahabharat, is to underscore the human trait of Ram. But the Ramopakhyana, a portion of the Aranyakaparvan of the Mahabharat though an interpolation, is not among the later inclusions in the epic because, there are portions where Ram is seen in his divine form, as an incarnate.

By the time the Ramayan was in its third stage of development, the core of the epic's story was being increasingly used by authors of religious texts, as well as by writers of classical Sanskrit literature. While the use of the epic in religious texts aided the theological development of Hindu society, the classical Sanskrit works continued with the original tradition of Valmiki. The oldest known examples of the classical literary tradition using the kernel of the Ramayan's story are the two plays, Pratimanataka and Abhishekanataka, both currently attributed to Bhasa and written sometime in the third century A.D. The first play, composed in seven acts, starts with the preparations

of Ram's installation as the king of Kosala empire, a process that is halted by Manthara. The play ends with Ram's victorious return to Ayodhya and his meeting with Bharat. The play uses the full story of the epic from the Ayodhyakand to the Yudhkand, but the events mentioned in the play are selectively chosen by the author of the play. The next play by the author is basically a drama based on the events of the epic that were left out from the first play. *Abhisheknataka* starts with the episode detailing the conflict between Vali and Sugriv and Ram's killing of Vali and the subsequent reproach by the dying Vanar king. The play has episodes like Sita's fire ordeal and ends with the installation of Ram as the king. In both the plays, the epic poem is followed, but this is not completely unexpected, given the early period in the development of classical literature.

Among the early classical literary works, the most well known one that is based on the Ram story is Kalidas's long poem *Raghuvamsa*. As indicated by its name, the poet narrates the story of the dynasty of Raghu, the Ishkvakus. The genealogy that Kalidas follows is in contrast to the one in the *Ramayan*, but is closer to the one presented in the *Vishnu Purana*, one of the religious texts of that time. The poet is aware of the *Uttarakand* as by the time *Raghuvamsa* was written — in the fourth or fifth century A.D. — the first and last books had been added to the *Valmiki Ramayan*. *Raghuvamsa* made Kalidas very famous, and the extent of his impact on early classical literature can be gauged from the fact that *Kumaradas*, a poet living a century later, based his work, *Jankiharana*, to a large extent on Kalidas's poem. This poem, while drawing heavily from Kalidas, is however, more romantic in form, lays greater emphasis on a naturalistic description and ends with Ram's triumphant return, and his taking the throne.

The growing schism in Hindu society between various Brahminical sects starts becoming more apparent with the passage of time. By the time the next well known literary work based on the *Ramayan* was penned, Brahma and Indra had fallen out of



favour and the two sects, Vaishnavism and Shaivism, were trying to rule Hindu society. This is indicated in the poem titled *Ravanavadh* (or *Bhattikavya*) written by the poet Bhatti who lived in the Valabhi kingdom during the regime of the Maitraka rulers between the years 490 A.D. and 650 A.D. Right in the beginning, the poet declares that Dashrath worships only Shiva and the poem concludes with Shiva, not Brahma, reminding Ram of his divine character. Bhatti's poem is a full summary of the Ramayan though he pays great attention to the romantic scenes of Sundarkand. Together with the battle scenes from Yudhkand, these descriptions account for more than half of Bhatti's poem. But, in spite of the visible indications of emerging schisms in Hindu society, it is interesting to note that even at this late stage, all the events narrated in Uttarakand are missing from the poem, and there are also no mythological references incorporated into the Balkand.

It was not that the Ram story was used by the Sanskrit poets only. During the same period — sixth century A.D. — a narrative poem in Prakrit was also written. Called *Setuband* (or *Ravanavah*), the poem was written by either a king by the name of Pravarasena or one of his court poets, and it is restricted, as the name suggests, to the period between Ram's attempt to build the raised footway over the sea to Lanka, to Ravana's death. Also, during this century, the narrative poem stops being used to spread the Ram legend. There are only two incomplete narrative poems after this period: Abhinanda's *Ramacharitra* of unknown date and Charkakavi's *Janakiparayana*, written as late as the seventeenth century A.D. and confined to the episode of Sita's wedding to Ram.

However, by the eighth century, drama again dominates the literary tradition to propagate the Ram story. After Bhasa's two plays, Bhavbhuti, a noted playwright, wrote *Mahaviracharitra* and *Uttaramcharitra*. By this time, almost every writer began taking liberties with the original Valmiki Ramayan and, not surprisingly, Bhavbhuti also does the same. His first play narrates

the main story of Ram and ends with his triumphant return to Ayodhya, while the latter play works on the themes of Uttarakand and centres around the banishment of Sita. Bhavbhuti develops considerably the marriage episode of Ram and Sita in Mahaviracharitra, and also introduces sub-plots to suggest that the roots of animosity between Ram and Ravan lay in Sita's decision to spurn the hand of Ravan. But, in Uttaramcharitra, the dramatist uses the clever method of devising a play within a play. This is done in the last act, where the plot is arranged by Valmiki introduced as a character, who has Sita deciding to throw herself into the Ganga, the birth of the twin boys, Ram fainting and finally a happy ending when the epic hero is revived by Sita's touch.

These two plays earned Bhavbhuti a lot of fame. In fact, later playwrights were greatly influenced by Bhavbhuti's plays. Shaktibhadra, who wrote Ascrayacudamani in the ninth century, relies on Bhavbhuti's model and emphasises on the two episodes of Sita giving a jewel to Hanuman and Ravan's attempt to woo Sita by donning the disguise of Ram. Plagiarisms of Bhavbhuti's plays continued through to the ninth and tenth centuries when Murari penned Anargharaja, Dhiranga wrote Kundamala based his drama on Bhavbhuti's Uttaramcharitra, and Rajashekhar authored Bal Ramayan. Even the relatively less significant dramas Hanumanatak and Mahanatak, compiled in the eleventh century, drew heavily from the models of Bhavbhuti, Murari and Rajshekhar. But, of greater significance is the play titled Prasanaraghav, written by Jayadev around 1200 AD, for Tulsidas used this drama as one of his basic sources for Ram Charit Manas. This play starts with the now familiar tale of Ravan coming to Janak's court to seek the hand of Sita, and the play closes with the return to Ayodhya in an aerial car called Pushpak. The play emphasises on the romantic tales of the Ramayan and is indicative of the change in the character of the Ram story from the time it was first penned by Valmiki about a thousand years ago. But, there were more changes to come.

It is obvious that the Ramayan provided the kernel for plots

to numerous works of literature in Sanskrit and Prakrit and has inspired generations of writers. However, while the original epic grew on its own accord, thanks to the bardic tradition, the dramatists and poets responded to the changing social values by coming out with different interpretations. Another significant way in which the Ram legend grew and thrived, is the religious tradition where Ram's story was recounted in every religious text, that started becoming like a stranglehold on Hindu society. The most important of these texts, the Puranas, have shown considerable acquaintance with the Ramayan, as also the Mahabharat. What is of interest to note is that the Ram story changed significantly, in each version in the line of Puranas, the deviations in the story depending on the motivation of the writer, and the sect of Hinduism he belonged to. It has been established that chronologically, each of the Puranas are later day works when compared to the original core of the two epics, but there are also indications that the Puranas considerably influenced the later interpolations in both the Ramayan and the Mahabharat.<sup>14</sup> The earliest of the Puranas, the Vayu Purana and Vishnu Purana, have little mention of the Ram story, with the first briefly incorporating the story of Ram and Ravan in its genealogical section, and the Vishnu Purana including the story of Ram in an avatar form while tracing the evolution of the solar dynasty. Even though the Vishnu Purana deals mainly with the story of Krishna, it does mention the episodes in Uttarakand of the Ramayan, which suggests that from the beginning, the writers of the Puranas were keen to project the divinity of Ram more than the human character of the epic hero.

However, the proponents of the Brahminical order were not quick to realise the full potential of the divine aspect of Ram's character to foster orthodoxy. This is evident in the Matsya Purana where, even though Valmiki is mentioned, there is no narration of the Ram story. It is clear, through several narrative examples, that the author of the Matsya Purana was aware of Valmiki's Ramayan, but chose not to incorporate the story in the

text. The situation started changing by the time the next Purana, the Padma Purana, was compiled during the mid-medieval period, where the text shows dependence on Kalidas and Bhavbhuti and contains extensive narratives from the Ramayan. There are several narratives in the Padma Purana which are indicative of the direction Hindu society was growing in. For the first time, Ram is shown to be suffering from a feeling of guilt for having killed Ravan, a Brahmin, and is advised by the sage Agastya to perform the *ashwamedha yagna* (Vedic horse ritual). The Purana also draws heavily from Balkand and Uttarakand, as well as from Ramopakhyana of the Mahabharat.

The text also has a detailed account of all the avatars of Vishnu, including Ram. This section of the narrative follows a pattern because Ram is shown to be the incarnate of Vishnu, while his brothers are mentioned as manifestations of different aspects of Vishnu's existence: Bharat is mentioned as the manifestation of the god's Conch, Laxman is shown to be Ananta's revelation while the Sudarshan Chakra manifests itself in the form of Shatrughna. There is also a detailed explanation that all the deities presiding over the entire universe had been seen by Kaushalya, Ram's mother, in his infancy. The fact that this aspect of Ram's divinity is incorporated in the story suggests that the episode was inspired by the tales of Krishna which had become popular by then. It also highlights the fact that the Brahminical order had realised the full potential of the divine aspects of Ram's story and consciously opted to propagate it. Compilers of religious texts were helped by the poetry and drama of Sanskrit literature, both of which were popular in a majority of courts of the time.

Several Vaishnav Puranas — Skand, Devi-bhagvat, Garud, Vishnudharmottara to name a few — which were written after the Padma Purana, further elaborate on the avatar aspect of Ram's story. The four brothers are presented as members of the Hindu pantheon, where Ram is the incarnate of Narayana or Vasudev, Bharat of Pradyumna, Laxman of Samskara and

**Shatrughna of Aniruddha. There are also some references to Ram in various Shaivite Puranas, like the Kurma Purana and the Shiv Purana, where the narratives of the Ram story are secondary. In the Shiv Purana, for instance, there is an episode where Shiva and Sati meet Ram along with Laxman in the forest, while they are sorrowfully searching for the abducted Sita. The narrative details Sati's scepticism about Ram's version, enables the epic hero to figure out the responsibility of the gods of the Hindu pantheon, and his responsibility as an avatar.**

But there are indications of Ram's future position in the Hindu pantheon of gods in the later Vaishnav Puranas. For instance, in the Devibhargava Purana, for the first time the Ramayan story is integrated with the worship of the Devi during Sharad Navaratri — a popular religious festival among the Vaishnavites in northern, western and eastern India even today. Even in the subsequent Puranas, Ram is kept on the same level as the established gods of the Hindu pantheon. In Mahabhagvat Purana and, subsequently, in the Brahdharma Purana, the texts are still written in the context of Navaratri worship, thus giving the required theological slant. So we have a narrative in which Vishnu and other gods seek the help of Shiva, since Ravan is his devotee. As a result of these implorings of Vishnu, Lakshmi (now supposed to be manifested in Sita), and other gods, Shiv decides to manifest himself in the form of Hanuman. This is also the period when the Brahminical order appears to be closing ranks as there are narratives of Ram deciding to establish the Shivling on the route to Lanka. With every new version of the Purana there is a greater association of Ram and his victory over Ravan with the Navaratri rituals of Devi worship. This is most evident in a later text, the Kalika Purana, where the link is greatly emphasised. This development has a great bearing on the continuous evolution of the Ram legend and his subsequent deification, as is apparent from the fact that even today the festival of Dusshera — to mark the victory of Ram over Ravan and the demon king's death — coincides with Vijay Dashami, the day when the Devi is believed

to have slain the demon, Mahisasur. Hence, by the time the religious texts completed the task of providing Hindu society with a set of structured rituals that had to be followed, the link between Ram and the Devi had been firmly established.

### **Ram Legend Spreads**

We have, so far, followed the growth and development of the Ram story and of Valmiki's original through different streams. While the bardic tradition aided in making interpolations in the sage's original work; literature provided a constant stream of new interpretations of the story; and religious texts helped in furthering the theological aspects of the story. But, these three forms are not the only ones which have contributed to the successful elevation of an epic hero to a revered god, whose final day of triumph coincides with the ritual of Devi worship. There have also been latter-day recastings of the epic, which reflect a much greater theological and sectarian fervour — the well known ones being the Yogavashishtha Ramayan, the Adhyatma Ramayan, the Adbhuta Ramayan and the Bhushandi Ramayan. All these versions, in Sanskrit, further took away the original humanness of Ram's character and contributed to the growing halo of divinity around him and all the characters of the epic.

However, literary and religious texts in Sanskrit and Prakrit alone did not complete Ram's evolution from a martial hero to a revered god. As the Ram legend spread far and wide — first within India and later to several other Asian countries — writers, translators and interpolators took substantial liberty with the original composition, keeping in mind the societal needs of the time and place, where the new versions were composed.

One of the first adaptations in an Indian language other than Sanskrit and Prakrit, was Iramavataram, a Tamil version written by Kampan. Though the time when it was authored is debated, it is most likely to have been written between the ninth and the tenth centuries. Significantly, the text is close to the version in

the Purana as extant then, and is now the oldest version of the devotional treatment of the Ram story in a living language in India. (Advocates of the Hindutva idea would like to believe that Sanskrit continues to be a living language in India, though reality points to the contrary.) It is not that the spread of Ram's story in southern India had to wait till the time when Kamban decided to translate the epic poem. Besides allusions to the Ram story even in earlier Tamil literary works, inscriptions of the Ramayan in Karnataka, which echo the concept of the ideal man in the opening section of the Balkand, is noticeable even in the early seventh century. But Kamban's work heralded the adoption of the Ram story in a big way by various writers from south India. While Abhinava Pampa wrote the Pampa Ramayan in Kannada in the eleventh century, it was followed by the Malayalam versions titled Ramacharitram and Ramakathapattu. These two are based primarily on the translation of Kamban's Iramavataram and are partial versions of the epic, mostly restricted to the Yudhkand. The aim of the authors of these works was to drive home the concepts of valour and sense of duty in Ram. There were other versions also in various south Indian languages, including the Attiyatuma Ramayan, by Ezuttaccan, the best known Malayalam version that is based on the sectarian Adhyatma Ramayan. In Telugu, another Dravidian language, there are currently three versions of the epic, but none of them have ever acquired a predominant position. The oldest adaptation was compiled in the thirteenth century by a poet named Ranganath, while the next was written a century later by a writer called Hulakki Bhaskar. The last adaptation of the Ramayan in Telugu was done in the sixteenth century.

It should be noted that adaptations of the Ramayan in south India were done before such attempts were made in other north Indian languages. This fact has an important bearing on the basic reason why people from south India have not been traditional followers of the Ram story, and are predominantly Shaivite. It must also be understood that none of the south Indian adaptations of the

epic poem, except those based on sectarian recastings, dwelt at length on the divine characteristics of Ram. Most of these adaptations stuck to the basic core of the story of Ram as a martial hero, duty bound to protect his kingdom, his family and also to follow the laws of society. All adaptations were primarily accounts of the moral aspects of Ram's character.

By the late fourteenth century, the story of Ram had come to have popular echoes in several parts of India. So far, the evolution of the Ram legend had been aided by bards who popularised and added to Valmiki's original; by classical literature; through various religious texts; and, as we have just seen, through adaptations in various languages of south India. However, at this stage, Ram had not yet been exalted to the status of god in the Hindu consciousness even though several versions proclaimed Ram to be an incarnation of Vishnu. The story more widely accepted was that of a brave king who sacrificed his personal aspirations for *dharma*, a person who represented the good and was always eager to lead a battle against evil forces. •

The late fourteenth century was also the time when several adaptations were done in other languages in India. The first major adaptation of the Ramayan, in an Indian language other than Sanskrit, Prakrit, or any of the south Indian languages, was the Bengali version composed by the poet Krittivyas in the fifteenth century. This version gave rise to a spate of Bengali adaptations, including one by the poetess Chandravati in the sixteenth century and others by Dvija Madhukantha, Kavichandra and Nityanand Acharya. In the version penned by Krittivyas, there are indications of Buddhist influences, an aspect borne out by the fact that in Bengal, there were still several remnants of Buddhism at that time. During the same period, adaptations were also done in many more languages — Oriya, Assamese, Gujarati, Marathi and, of course, in Hindi. Barring some deviations, almost all are based on the prevalent versions of the Ramayan. Depending on the author's outlook, the emphasis on the source varies — while some of the writers primarily depended on sectarian recastings, others based



their work on religious texts, or even on the bardic tradition and Valmiki's original.

### **Ram Becomes Part of Folklore**

However, in north India, none of these adaptations led to the kind of popularisation of the Ram story as Goswami Tulsidas's work, *Ram Charit Manas*, did. The poet, who belonged to the medieval Bhakti tradition, started writing his version in 1574 in Ayodhya, and completed it after several years in Varanasi. *Ram Charit Manas* became immensely popular even during the lifetime of Tulsidas, and is still one of the most popular versions of the story. In fact, this version has virtually become the standard Ramayan in several parts of India. In a way, when Tulsidas penned it, the time was ripe for the rise of a writer to popularise the Ram story. Ever since Valmiki composed the original epic poem, the Ramayan had a large following, but its sweep was never as wide. The story had grown through the centuries, many details had been incorporated, the basic nature of Ram had undergone a transformation. The deification of the martial hero had been more or less completed. But he was still not popular at the level of folklore and had not quite penetrated the consciousness of the people. The legend of Ram remained restricted to the court and theologians. But in a single stroke, Tulsidas managed to make the Ram story popular. The traditional staging of *Ramlila*, a popular form of theatre on Ram's life, is primarily based on Tulsidas's work and is prevalent even today in many parts of north India. The actual beginning of the 'Ram cult' started in this region, only after the popularisation of *Ramlila*. The contribution of Tulsidas in popularising the story of Ram has never been denied, but it is of special significance now, given the pre-eminent position of Ram in the political theatre of India.

Tulsidas, in his attempt to write the story of Ram in the Avadhi dialect of Hindi, opted to base his work on several existing versions of the Ramayan and its story, instead of just a

single version. He drew from the original text, the Puranas, and extensively from the Adhyatma Ramayan. In fact, the Ram Charit Manas is conspicuous by its non-sectarian use of source material.<sup>15</sup> Tulsidas did not opt to maintain the proportional division between various books of the Valmiki Ramayan, but chose to give greater emphasis to certain sections. Balkand is the longest of all the books in Tulsidas's work and, alongwith the Ayodhyakand, it accounts for nearly two thirds of the total length of the work. This contributed to the popularisation of Ram's divinity and extensive chapters focusing on his character, aided the gradual acceptance of Ram as an exemplary figure. An important aspect of Tulsidas's work is his emphasis on the Bhakti aspect and the philosophical portions of his work. In fact, Tulsidas was not the only Bhakti poet who, while translating, created a new version of the story of Ram. It was done in Marathi also by the medieval poet Eknath, who died in 1599, leaving the Bhavarth Ramayan incomplete. This work is also of great significance as considerable attention has been devoted to the philosophical and theological sections of the book. The writer also extolled the concept of Ram Rajya, the kingdom of god on earth where Ram was the upholder of *dharma*.

By the time the Bhakti movement had become a nation-wide phenomenon, the story of Ram had spread not only to every nook and corner of India, but also in several other countries of Asia. The story of Ram travelled to China, Japan, Tibet, Indonesia, Burma, Vietnam, Java, Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, and the Philippines. It was taken to these countries mostly by travellers and pilgrims who had visited India and by the end of the seventeenth century, there were many versions of the story in these countries. The trend of making adaptations of the basic plot continued with some of these versions presenting Ram as a person who was Buddha in his previous life. These texts had the Buddhist philosophy as its theological core, but the episodes of the Ramayan were common on many occasions. In some countries, the story of Ram became so popular, that the

kings started adopting the title of Ram. It is important to note that in all these versions, Ram's popularity was related to his martial abilities and sense of morality. The kings who adopted the title of Ram, did so for these reasons, and not for any association of divinity with Ram's character.

It is clear that in the initial stages of the evolution of Ram's story from the time Valmiki composed the original epic, the climax lay in the military defeat of Ravan. Even at this stage, there were some moral components to Ram's character underscored by his obedience to Dashrath when banished. During the trio's travails in the jungles, Ram dons the mantle of a *kshatriya* when protecting the harassed hermits from demons. At this stage, Ram is still human though constantly compared to Indra — but that is more because of Indra's position as the king of gods than any divine trait in Ram. However, divinity is slowly introduced into Ram's character, even though he is still viewed as a human. This is also the time when there is an increasing realisation among the theologians as well as others involved in furthering the story of Ram, that he can no longer be compared to Indra because of the latter's declining status. This is the time when there are substantial additions to the Ram story in the form of the Balkand and Uttarakand. This is also the time when the Ramopakhyana is added in the Mahabharat.

However, there are already indications of Ram's future deification when Bhasa, in his plays, views Ram as a divine person. This is also the time when religious influence in the growth of Ram's story, starts becoming apparent. But, by the end of the twelfth century, there is a greater emphasis on the divine nature of Ram, and allusions of his being an incarnate of Vishnu is common belief. As the story of the legendary Ram evolves, contradictions in Hindu society also start becoming obvious. Ram's youth is remodelled on the life of Krishna, projected as another avatar of Vishnu. There is also struggle between the followers of Shiva and Vishnu, first manifest in Ravan's worship of the Shivling and later, in the interpolation in some Puranas

which have Ram installing a Shivling on the way to Lanka. With the Brahminical order gaining ground, Ram becomes an important member of the Hindu pantheon. This is greatly aided by popular literature — most significantly Tulsidas — in making the story of Ram a part of folklore. By the time the British came to have political hegemony over India, Ram's position in the pantheon of gods was no longer in doubt. The character by that time epitomised what Valmiki seeks to ask Narada, a significant mythological sage, in his work:

“Who in the world nowadays is exemplary and courageous, right-minded and grateful, truthful and resolute? Who adheres to virtue? Who is kind to all?”

Coupled with such a powerful character, the avatar concept which has gained acceptance through the ages, makes it mandatory for every practising Hindu to revere Ram. So it was only natural that in a country like India, the image of Ram should be used for political gains. This was first done by Mahatma Gandhi when, in the midst of the national movement, he talked about his vision of Ram Rajya. From the beginning, advocates of Hindutva recognised the dominant position of Ram in the Hindu consciousness and the potential of using him as an icon in their political strategy. However, their political adversaries failed to realise the power in the image of Ram, giving the proponents of Hindutva the opportunity to interpret Ram's character in a manner that would suit both their immediate and long-term political strategies. Valmiki had ended his marathon composition thus: “Here ends the story and its sequel, the prime Ramayan graced by Brahma and composed by Valmiki”. Clearly, Valmiki is being proved wrong as the story of Ram has surely not ended in India...



## CHAPTER 3

# Ayodhyākāṇḍ



*And the main roads of Ayodhya  
Were scattered with flowers  
And the perfume of incense  
By the rejoicing citizens;  
And massive trees, tall as torches,  
Turned night into day;  
And there was noisy joy  
At the crossroads  
And the city of Ayodhya, teeming with  
crowds....*

**From The Ramayan's Ayodhyakand**

**T**he highway that leads to several districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh from the state capital of Lucknow, cuts through the twin towns of Faizabad and Ayodhya. The two towns, in fact, merge into each other and on the crowded stretch of the road — replete with an assortment of slow moving vehicles — it is difficult to step on the accelerator. Shortly before the police barrier which announces your entry into the temple-town, a dirt-track branches off the highway. After crossing the railway lines running parallel to the highway, the track comes to an end in front of an imposing white, typically Islamic, building called the Yateemkhana orphanage. The building is adjacent to the 'Bari Bua' or the big graveyard, a place where the Muslims of the two towns prefer to bury their dead.

The Yateemkhana orphanage is the place where the Muslims

of Ayodhya had come for shelter after the organised attacks against them on December 6, 1992, destroyed their property and left 18 of their brethren dead. At the height of its activity as a 'relief camp', the Yateemkhana housed close to 4,000 Muslims from Ayodhya. The corners of the rooms functioned as hearths as adults tried to protect the children against the raging cold winds. They had "failed to protect their children from the communal frenzy, but could at least provide them a warm shelter".<sup>1</sup> The relief camp was administered by local leaders of the community who kept records of any aid that filtered through to the Yateemkhana from Muslims living in other towns. Predictably, government aid was tardy. The senior-most civil administrator, the District Magistrate, when questioned, doled out figures. In the first instance, he said 554, then hastily corrected it to "778 blankets" were distributed among the people staying in the Yateemkhana. The magnitude and scale of attacks on Muslims in the 70-odd hours of mayhem after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and the subsequent sluggishness of the local administration in providing speedy aid and relief to the victims and promptly investigating the manner of rioting, have left the Muslims of Ayodhya bitter. This trend continued long after the riots with Muslims being accused of violating building by-laws for repairing their damaged houses. It is obvious that the Muslims of Ayodhya, had no other place to go to after the attacks on them, except the local orphanage.

However, two months later, on February 6, 1993, the scene at the Yateemkhana was one of gaiety. Festivities were in the air as young, colourfully dressed girls trooped in and out of the building. Inside, in the massive courtyard, elders of the community distributed small packets containing a set of new utensils. The young girls were delighted at receiving the gifts. Outside the orphanage, several rickshaws were lined up and the people were loading them with all that was left of their belongings. The Muslims of Ayodhya had chosen this day to return to what used to be their homes. Only two months ago they were



the victims of a systematic attempt to ethnically cleanse Ayodhya and drive out all the Muslims — a move which had faint echoes in the past. But, with the fervour gone for the moment, the displaced inhabitants of Ayodhya were keen to return and start afresh. They had earlier visited their homes and surveyed the damage done to their property. Their neighbours — including some who had participated in the attacks on them — had pledged protection and asked them to come back. One victim at the Yateemkhana emphatically declared that Ayodhya was, after all, his “janmabhoomi” too, and that he too had every right to live there.

It had never been an easy existence for Muslims in Ayodhya particularly so, after the VHP-led agitation came to the fore. In the early years after the dispute first surfaced, the Muslims were docile because of the humiliating experiences of the Partition. The Muslims of Ayodhya also found no support from Muslims elsewhere and the disarray in their ranks is best underscored by the fact that the first legal claim on the Babri Masjid was made by Muslims in 1961, 12 years after the idols were installed.

The Muslims had chosen this day to return to their homes not because the date on the calendar marked exactly two months since the demolition — such considerations were far from their minds. They were returning because the next day was Shab-e-Barat, the Muslim festival comparable to the Christian All Souls’ Day, when Muslims pray for their dead. They had to pray for the safe entry of their dead into heaven, including those killed two months ago, and this could not be done unless the fire was rekindled in their homes. As the families bundled into the waiting rickshaws, their apprehensions about returning to the homes they were once hounded out of, were different. The women’s concerns largely centered around the food that had to be cooked for the next day and wondering where the provisions would come from. Would the neighbourhood shopkeeper continue to give them revolving credit? The men were worried about reconstructing the damaged houses. Where would the money

for repair come from? The miserly amount that the government had fixed as compensation for the damage wreaked on their properties<sup>2</sup> would most certainly not suffice. Reports about Hindu traders dealing in construction materials having hiked their prices with the prospect of business coming their way, were already doing the rounds. The men were equally concerned about the safety of their families. Though promised protection by neighbours, apprehensions lurked in their minds as the rickshaws slowly made their way towards Ayodhya. A newspaper article stated that though the "Muslim residents do not want to leave (Ayodhya), they are apprehensive about their future".<sup>3</sup> The men were also worried about how their children would react when they reached home and found nothing there. The children had been witness to the attacks and had overheard animated discussions among adults during their stay at Yateemkhana, but had not ventured to go to Ayodhya till now. However, for the moment, such thoughts did not bother the children. A majority of them viewed their stay at the orphanage as a 'picnic' and all that they thought about was that the next day was Shab-e-Barat — a day when they could play all day, burst crackers, wear new clothes and, above all, eat *halwa*, a traditional north Indian dessert and a must in every Muslim home on the day.

But on that day, even if the Muslims of Ayodhya had decided to put the events of December 6 behind them and return to their homes, the town still bore the unmistakable signs of the demolition. At the Babri Masjid site, the debris of the historical shrine lay scattered all over the mound on which it had stood. Some artefacts, which had reportedly surfaced during the demolition, were dumped in the building from where leaders of the VHP and BJP had overseen the levelling of the masjid. A semi-naked sadhu seemed to turn delirious when he approached the rubble of the Babri Masjid, shouting he would not rest till a magnificent temple was built there and Ram was given a decent resting place. Pointing in the direction of the hastily erected structure, the old man, who had forsaken his family and made the streets of Ayodhya his

home, said that his heart wept whenever he had *darshan* of the idols kept there. Elsewhere in the town, burnt houses, upturned two-wheelers, and smashed up steel almirahs, were indicative of the extent of anger against the Muslims.

The events in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, which led to the pulverisation of the Babri Masjid, have been extensively documented and publicised by the media. Film footage of the domes being hammered down by hundreds of frenzied kar sevaks sporting saffron *bandanas* was broadcast on TV. Photographs of the advocates of Hindutva jumping with joy and sitting astride the shoulders of others to get a better view of the domes crashing down were published in newspapers. However, several dramatic events that were unfolding elsewhere in the town went relatively unnoticed.

The onslaught against the Muslims of Ayodhya started even as the domes were coming down. While a few hundred kar sevaks busied themselves with the construction of the new structure, others ransacked Muslim houses, burnt property and even killed. This reign of terror lasted for nearly 70 hours — even after the state government had been dismissed and Central rule imposed within hours of the demolition. But, while the meticulous destruction of the Babri Masjid has become a watershed in Indian history, the subsequent attacks on the Muslims of Ayodhya have been pushed into the background. It seems, on that day, the saffron dust that rose from the destroyed domes overpowered the black smoke rising from the burnt houses of Muslims. And the smoke continued to emanate long after the dust from the debris of the mosque settled down.

Both the demolition of the mosque and the attacks against the Muslims were cleverly executed. Even though the proponents of Hindutva maintain that all that happened in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 was spontaneous, subsequent evidence does not corroborate this. The demolition of the shrine was not the handiwork of novices, but of people who knew how to go about their job. Over-enthusiasm on the part of some kar sevaks, who

did not belong to the trained core of demolishers, led to some deaths and injuries when the first dome collapsed at 1.55 p.m. — barely two hours after the action had started. This led to the core group taking charge and, in the subsequent phase of the demolition, no one climbed atop the domes. The base of the shrine was attacked and once gaping holes appeared, big iron hooks were fixed on the walls and pulled by the demolishers. Also the fact that the action was temporarily halted while the idol was removed by one of the important priests connected with the VHP, makes it amply clear that the demolition was an organised act. In fact, the unruly frenzy lasted only until the first dome collapsed but, after it became apparent that there would be no opposition from the police, the demolition was executed with planned precision.

The attacks on the Muslims of Ayodhya were carried out in a similar manner. The first act was to torch the homes of Muslims in the vicinity of the Babri Masjid. Selective targeting was done only later when it was clear that there was no one to enforce law and order in the town.

What lends credence to the charge that the attacks on Muslims in Ayodhya were pre-planned and meticulously executed, is the fact that unlike other towns and cities in India, there are no Muslim ghettos in the temple-town. Houses of Hindus and Muslims stand cheek by jowl in every colony in the town, and the people have lived in harmony for centuries in spite of the contentious dispute over the now demolished shrine. Barring the odd one, the facades of the houses do not indicate the religion of the owner. In December 1992, however, the houses were targeted one by one, without even one instance of an erroneous attack on a Hindu household. The mobs had clearly been provided with lists of Muslim households and this would not have been possible without the support of local Hindu residents. There are two very small Muslim pockets in Ayodhya — Alamganj Katra and Society — and both these were destroyed in the attacks following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. A journalist

records: "These neighbourhoods had been completely destroyed, especially Society *mohallah* with its twenty-odd houses reduced to rubble and the minars of the tiny masjid, strewn about on the grass. Most of the bricks from the houses were dated 1924".<sup>4</sup>

The same report continues: "But perhaps the most gruesome act of violence was committed in Tehdi Bazar the colony that housed Muslim artisans who supplied 12,000 pair of wooden sandals to the VHP when they launched *yatras* in October 1992. (The sandals were meant to symbolise the mythological sandals of Ram that his brother Bharat kept as a mark of authority while he ruled in proxy from nearby Nandigram) just behind the disputed site and adjacent to a vacant plot of land where many of the kar sevaks camped during their stay at Ayodhya. Thirteen-year-old Tony and his father, Shaukat, a school teacher, were cut into pieces by sword-wielding kar sevaks and then burnt on the *chabutra* of their house. Shreds of blood stained clothing were still lying at the spot where they had been lynched". Not a single house belonging to a Muslim was spared in the violence that followed the demolition on December 6, 1992. It appeared "as if the kar sevaks had gone around with a voters' list in their hands. There was nothing spontaneous about the violence, just as there was nothing spontaneous about the assault of the Babri Masjid".<sup>5</sup>

However, in spite of the fervent desire of the advocates of the Hindutva idea, Ayodhya remained ethnically cleansed for barely two months. And, in spite of the hatred against Muslims that reigned supreme on that fateful Sunday, once the initial euphoria had disappeared, several Hindu residents of the temple town had started accepting their Muslim neighbours back. They later blamed the violence to an aberration in behaviour. For the Muslims also, there was little option but to return to Ayodhya. Coming mainly from the working class, options for migrating to other cities were further restricted after similar targeted attacks on Muslims in Bombay — the commercial and industrial capital of India. There were also instances of Hindus pledging to protect their Muslim neighbours in the event of another attack. In the

Tehdi Bazar colony, Ramshankar (a Hindu) has (in January 1993) welcomed Qasim (a Muslim) and his family to his home. He has publicly declared: "Anyone who tries to kill Qasim, will have to kill me first".<sup>6</sup>

Several Muslims in Ayodhya also seem to possess an unnerving amount of grit. Take the case of Mohammed Hashim Ansari, a 72-year-old tailor, who is the main litigant from the Muslim side in the ongoing legal battle for the control of the disputed site. His house, adjacent to the only *dharamkanta* (weighbridge) on the highway connecting the twin towns, was specially targeted by kar sevaks as he had come closest to the image of Babur (the first Mughal emperor who is considered to have ordered the construction of the Babri Masjid), who the VHP and its supporters were seeking to take revenge on. His house was attacked twice — once before December 6, 1992 forcing the local administration to post a handful of policemen outside his house, and later when hatred against the Muslims spread all over Ayodhya. When the kar sevaks broke into his house in the afternoon of December 6, not finding either Ansari or any member of his family inside, they roasted alive the goats and the hens that had been reared to supplement the family income. Every single item of valuable was taken away, a steel almirah was overturned and beaten out of shape and choicest abuse was scrawled on the walls with charcoal. Smeared over one smashed door was a sign of visible anger: "Hashim, now it is your turn." Another bit of graffiti sought to rationalise the hatred against the family: "You suffer because you are a descendant of Babur."

Yet, the man was resolute on returning to his house again. While overseeing the minimal repair that he had been able to organise, Ansari said, "why should I leave Ayodhya? If we do then we will be doing just what they want. I will stay here and still try to seek justice".<sup>7</sup> A God-fearing Muslim, Hashim Ansari got embroiled in the dispute not out of choice. When the local administration registered the first legal case in December 1949 after a mob of Hindu devotees entered the Babri Masjid and

installed the idols of Ram, Ansari was impleaded in the case as he was one of the few Muslims of eminence in Ayodhya. That started his involvement with the dispute which has continued for more than 40 years and in the process, he has been forced to close shop, leaving all money matters to be managed by his brother and those of the next generation in the family. There have been allegations that Ansari had received a lot of money for his illegal campaign, but there was never any visible signs of wealth during the several meetings with him since 1986. What however, has grown tremendously over the years, is Ansari's earthy political sense. A semi-literate man, Ansari was a man of few words in 1986. He preferred the 90-year-old Abdul Ghafoor, who used to lead the namaz at the Babri Masjid before the installation of the idols, to do all the talking. For specific legal queries, Ansari would direct people to a Muslim lawyer in Faizabad who was handling the case gratis.

In all our meetings, Ansari had sounded hopeful. There was not a single occasion when he equated all the Hindus of India with the VHP and its allies. "This is a political battle to come to power. They are just feeding the minds of Hindus with lies. There is nothing wrong with the Hindus, they are, after all, my countrymen," Ansari would often say. He took pride in the fact that during Partition, not a single Muslim family left Ayodhya to migrate to Pakistan, while several of them moved from Faizabad. "If we were safe then, nothing will happen to us now," he used to say. Even when his hopes were shattered, Ansari said that he would continue staying in Ayodhya, in his own house, because he symbolised the secular aspirations of a large number of Indians. "I will have to leave Ayodhya after India becomes a Hindu Rashtra, but till that time I will continue living here and test each political party and every single leader so that I know whom to trust when my final hour comes".<sup>8</sup> However, not everyone in his own family shared Ansari's optimism and bravado. Barely six months after the demolition, his younger brother, staying in the house adjacent, put up a 'house for immediate sale' sign atop the tenement.<sup>9</sup>

But, it would be incorrect to say that Hindus and Muslims had cohabitated peacefully in Ayodhya prior to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Since the VHP launched the agitation for the "liberation of Ram Janmabhoomi", there were some isolated cases of arson in 1990 after attempts to demolish the disputed shrine were thwarted by the state government headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav. But even prior to 1947 when India attained Independence, Ayodhya had witnessed the two communities clashing on some occasions. There was at least one clash in which the Babri Masjid was substantially damaged. There were also some deaths reported in these clashes.

### **Conflicts Begin**

By the nineteenth century, Ayodhya was an important centre in the kingdom of Awadh even though the capital had shifted to Lucknow in 1775, after Asif-ud-Daulah abandoned Faizabad. Also by this time, since the story of Ram was thriving, the field was clear to sow the seeds of discord among Hindus and Muslims, living harmoniously here. This was done in a systematic manner by Imperial power, aided by the nascent animosity between the two communities and an ineffective kingdom of Awadh.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the kingdom of Awadh was in its final stage of decline. Even though Ayodhya continued to be a part of the sovereign state of Awadh, it had been put under administrative and revenue control of the British Resident based in Lucknow under the Treaty of 1819. The same year the kingdom formally announced its decision to move away from the control of Delhi. Awadh had been made a part of the Delhi Sultanate after Akbar embarked on his eastward expansion. It was in 1853 that Hindus and Muslims fought the first bloody battle. The acrimony continued for two years and ended in 1855 only after the elders of the two communities thrashed out a settlement of sorts. When tracing the development of this



period, is it becomes clear that while the British Resident practically did not intervene in the continuing clash, the Nawab of Awadh made feeble attempts to settle the dispute and contributed to the final settlement which kept the dispute at bay, for several decades.

By the time the dispute between the Hindu sants and the local Muslims came out in the open in 1853, the belief had spread among Hindu priests that the mosque — then called Jami Masjid or Masjid Sita Rasoi because it was located next to a Hindu temple to mark Sita's kitchen — was built by Babur after demolishing a temple which marked the birthplace of Ram. Even as the Hindu priests argued their case, the Muslims reacted by claiming the Hanuman Garhi, a massive fort like temple at the base of the hill where the mosque was situated. The Muslims claimed that the Hanuman Garhi was a mosque built by Aurangzeb which had been surreptitiously taken over by a Hindu priest. These disputes recurred time and again and, in 1853, the Hindu priests took over the mosque and drove out the Imam who used to manage the affairs of the shrine. The priests who spearheaded this takeover were Vaishnavite *bairagis* who had frequently clashed with the Shaivite *sanyasis*. There are reports that while this takeover was peaceful, trouble started brewing when the *bairagis* expelled one priest from their ranks, who then went to Lucknow and spread the rumour that the Hindus had destroyed the mosque.<sup>10</sup> The cause of the mosque was immediately embraced by Moulvi Amir Ali, a descendant of Sheikh Bandagi Mian, a famous Sufi saint of Amethi. The Moulvi was in Lucknow at that time to seek a renewal for his rent-free land grant and thought, that if he adopted the cause of the mosque at Ayodhya, it would enhance his status and give him a foothold in the Nawab's court. The Nawab returned to Amethi and immediately declared a *jihad* for the restoration of the mosque which, by now, was being referred to as the Babri Masjid. The Moulvi was successful in herding together an armed combine from among the Muslims and some lower caste Hindus.

The poet king, Wajid Ali Shah, was a disturbed man when he learnt of this plan to march to Ayodhya. Emissaries were sent to Amethi to ask the Moulvi to return to Lucknow. This suited the Moulvi whose basic purpose had been served. Wajid Ali Shah also ordered that the mosque be restored to the Imam, who had been hounded out by the *bairagis*. But, the king's orders were not carried out, prompting the Moulvi to head towards Ayodhya with his forces and camp at Daryabad, a place between Amethi and Ayodhya. Wajid Ali Shah also asked the British Resident to take action in Ayodhya but when the British refused, he dispatched his own forces towards the the Moulvi's camp. This caused panic in the ranks of the rebels and half of them fled. Meanwhile, the first regiment of the Oudh Irregular Regiment was ordered to halt the progress of the Moulvi and his men. The two forces met at a place called Shahganj on the highway between Amethi and Ayodhya, and the armed conflict that raged for several hours was decided in favour of the British forces. The Moulvi was killed and his head was sent to the Nawab, following which the Moulvi came to be regarded as a martyr — an annual fair was held in his memory at a place in Bara Banki district for close to 50 years.

But the clash between Moulvi Amir Ali's forces and the British troops did not alter the situation in Ayodhya. The Hindu priests continued to have total control over the mosque which, by now, was openly referred to as the Babri Masjid. The Muslims also mounted their campaign to drive out the Hindu priests from Hanuman Garhi, which they did in the beginning of 1855. They first re-occupied the mosque by force and drove out the Hindu *bairagi* priests. This was followed by a charge on the Hanuman Garhi temple and Muslims came up to the steps of the temple. The 'Bairagis' drove out the Muslims but, both sides suffered substantial human loss. However, the 'Bairagis' after repelling the Muslim attackers, tried to regain control of the mosque, and mounted an assault on the mosque. There was a pitched battle at the gate of the mosque and both sides had heavy casualties.

However, the 'Bairagis' failed to seize control, and had to retreat to the Hanuman Garhi. There are reports that 75 Muslims died in these clashes and were buried in front of the mosque and the place came to be called Ganj-Shahidan (martyr's place).<sup>11</sup> This graveyard was dug up first by the VHP in 1989, when it performed the ritual of shilanyas ostensibly to lay the foundation stone of the proposed new temple; and later by the BJP state government in early 1992, when the disputed land was acquired to be handed over to the VHP for constructing the temple. The graveyard had also been targeted earlier in Hindu-Muslim riots, in the aftermath of the Partition of the sub-continent.

What is apparent from the records of this period is the total apathy and partisan approach on the part of the British government in intervening in the dispute, even though Ayodhya was under its administrative and revenue control. A British document that mentions the clash of 1855 says: "In 1855 when a great rupture took place between Hindus and Muslims, the former occupied the Hanuman Garhi in full force while the Muslims took possession of the Janmasthan. The Muslims on that occasion, actually charged up the stairs of the Hanuman Garhi, but were driven back with considerable loss. The Hindus then followed up this success, and at the third attempt, took the Janmasthan at the gate of which 75 Muslims were buried in the martyr's grave. Eleven Hindus were killed. Several of the King's regiment were looking on all the time, but their orders were not to interfere".<sup>12</sup>

There are two points to be noted: First, that British forces were passive spectators while the bloody clash was going on. Secondly, throughout the report, the word mosque was not used and the disputed place was referred to as Janmasthan — an indication of the British bias against the Muslim minority. Both these points not only indicate that good governance was not the prime concern of the British, but also underscores the accepted notion that dominant philosophy of colonialism was "divide and rule." In this case, there was already a nascent division and the British

only widened the gap. In fact, in 1855, the British were not really concerned about settling the dispute between the Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya, as the goal in front of the colonial power was to annex the kingdom of Awadh. Preparations for this had already started and Colonel Sleeman, the British Resident in Lucknow, was extensively touring the kingdom to cite instances that would justify the annexation of Awadh. His report filed to the East India Company stated that the authority of the Nawab had dwindled greatly, and that the general law and order situation in the entire kingdom was extremely appalling. The clash in Ayodhya in 1855 was the final citation and it came in handy. The British completed the annexation of Awadh in early 1856 — the troops moved in following Wajid Ali Shah's refusal to accept the British offer of Rs 12 lakh a year.

The British inactivity in trying to amicably settle the dispute between the *bairagis* and the Muslims of Ayodhya notwithstanding, Wajid Ali Shah and a significant section of the local population were sufficiently disturbed over the repeated clashes in the town, to make an attempt at reaching a compromise formula that would put an end to the dispute and satisfy the warring groups. A meeting of the elders of the two communities was convened and the British Resident was requested to preside over the session. It was agreed at the meeting that both the communities would use the contentious shrine — while the Muslims would continue to use the main mosque for offering prayers, the Hindus were allowed to use the place outside the main mosque structure, but within the compound. This arrangement brought peace to Ayodhya and remained so even when the British annexed Awadh on February 13, 1856.

However, more problems were around the corner as the simple 'Sepoy Mutiny' against the British in 1857-58 transformed itself into a popular uprising against the colonial rulers in Awadh. Even as people rose in a rebellious mood, and British life and property came under threat, the *bairagis* of Ayodhya came to the rescue of the British. A British account states that

the British of Faizabad and Ayodhya, were sheltered by the priests of Hanuman Garhi, who also enabled them to escape from the rebels, to Gonda.<sup>13</sup>

Naturally, when the British succeeded in quelling the great uprising, they were indebted to those who had helped them during the crisis, and the *bairagis* of Ayodhya were clearly on the list of people who had to be rewarded for their show of loyalty. For the Babri Masjid, this spelt more trouble. The local administration (by this time the British could no longer remain passive administrators) argued that the communal situation in the town had been volatile since 1853, and that the agreement of 1855 between the members of the two communities, was not a foolproof guarantee against the outbreak of another round of violence. The administration further argued that it was time for another settlement and that this was not possible unless the spot being used by the Hindus was physically demarcated from the main mosque building. So the British allowed the *bairagis* to erect a small platform in front of the Babri Masjid. Between the main mosque and the platform a grilled fence was erected, called Ram Chabutra, which was supposed to mark the place where Ram was born. The local British officials also passed an order whereby the Muslims would no longer be permitted to use the main gate to the mosque on the eastern side, but were to use the gate on the northern side. The Hindus, however, remained free to use the main entrance, but were directed not to enter the mosque.

### Colonialism Queers the Pitch

The fence that was erected by the British within the compound of the Babri Masjid in 1859 was symbolic of the divide between the Hindus and Muslims of Ayodhya — something that came about only in the first half of the nineteenth century. Similar actions by the British accentuated this division among the people. The story that the mosque was built after demolishing a grandiose Ram temple that marked his birthplace, gained

popularity only after British involvement in Awadh. Several British writers popularised such stories, without making any attempt to check their veracity. Soon, these writers and their writing had a definite impact on the minds of the administrators — blurring the line between fact and fiction, history and legend. In fact, much of what was being presented by British writers to be the history of India was little more than either what was physically seen by them or tales that were narrated to them by local residents. For Ayodhya, these writers helped in falsifying several aspects of its story and widened the gap between the Hindus and Muslims in the town.

Successive accounts by nineteenth century British writers reveal that different versions of the history of a place correspond with the changes in popular beliefs of the time. However, there is no attempt to put on record that there were indeed changes that these were indicative of the social transformation in India. This naturally leads to great confusion in piecing together a cogent history of Ayodhya. One of the earliest British documents has "Oude" as a town that is "much celebrated in Hindoo history as the kingdom of Dasratham the father of great Rama, who extended his empire to the island of Ceylon".<sup>14</sup> However, the same document says elsewhere, that "the city of Agra is supposed to be the birthplace of the Avatar, or the incarnation of Vishnu, under the name of Parasu Rama, whose conquests extended to and included Ceylon".<sup>15</sup>

Walter Hamilton, the writer of this account also described Ayodhya as he saw and perceived it. "Pilgrims resort to this vicinity where the remains of the ancient capital of Oude, the capital of the great Rama, are still to be seen; but whatever may have been its former magnificence, it now exhibits nothing but a shapeless mass of ruins. The modern town extends a considerable way along the banks of the Gogra, adjoining Faizabad, and is tolerably well peopled, but inland it is a mass of rubbish and jungle, among which are the reputed sites of Rama, Seeta, his wife, Lakshman, his general, and Hanuman (a large monkey),

his prime minister. The religious mendicants who perform the pilgrimage are mainly from the Ramtata sect who walk around the temples and idols, bathe in the holy pools and perform the customary ceremonies".<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that in the second decade of the nineteenth century, Hamilton did not find a significant prevalence of the story of Babur demolishing a temple to build the mosque on a place that marked a "reputed site" of Ram. In fact, there is no suggestion in Hamilton's writings that at the time of his visit to Ayodhya, the people of the town believed it to be the birthplace of Ram.

Hamilton's account of Ayodhya was a little different from that of the earlier European visitors to Ayodhya. William Finch, probably the first European to visit Ayodhya between 1608 and 1611, also describes the bathing ghats and a fort in ruins. He narrates the popular story of Ram — by this time Tulsidas had completed the Ram Charit Manas — and says that Ram is considered to be an incarnate of Vishnu and that he took on a human form. Finch does not make any mention of a mosque built by Babur after demolishing a temple, built by a famous king called Vikramaditya. He also makes no mention of the belief that the town is considered to be the place where Ram was born. Finch is not the only early European writer who made no mention of the controversial story of Babur. It is clear that at a time when the British came to have administrative and revenue control of Ayodhya in the second decade of the nineteenth century, none of the British or other European writers found any trace of the popular belief that Ayodhya was Ram's birthplace; that a temple built to mark the site had been demolished by the Mughal emperor Babur in 1528 to build a mosque; and that this was a matter of contention between the Hindus and Muslims of the town.

However, soon after and corresponding with the growing political ambitions of the colonial regime, the British perception of the history of Ayodhya started changing dramatically. The story of Ayodhya being the birthplace of Ram came in handy

for the British writers, who were modelling the official policy of the time. At the same time, the belief that Mughal emperors had indulged in wanton destruction of Hindu temples and the theory that the two communities were mutual adversaries, gained ground and acceptance in official records. This view was largely cemented by Montgomery Martin, a British officer, specially deputed by the East India Company to survey eastern India. His writings categorically asserted Aurangzeb's negative role in the destruction of several Hindu temples which resulted in the deterioration of relations between Hindus and Muslims. But even in 1838, when Martin wrote his survey report, he doubted whether the pillars in the mosque (by now Martin referred to it as a mosque built by Babur) were that of a temple. He wrote: "I think the existence of such temples are doubtful and if they did not exist, it is probable that the pillars have been taken from the ruins of the palace".<sup>17</sup>

But, whatever element of scrutiny Martin used in 1838 before giving the sanctity of history to folklore, disappeared completely in just about 20 years. In 1860, P. Carnegey, an officer of the Bengal Civil Service who was stationed in Faizabad gave official sanction to the popular belief. He wrote: "At the time of the Muslim conquest there were three important Hindu shrines and little else, the Janmasthan temple, the Swagaddwar and Tretaka-Thakur. The Janmasthan was in Ramkot and marked the birthplace of Rama. It seems that in 1528 AD, Babur visited Ayodhya and under his orders this ancient temple was destroyed, and on its site was built what came to be known as Babur's mosque. The material of the old temple was largely employed in building the mosque and a few of the original columns are all in good preservation".<sup>18</sup> Carnegey also suggested in his writings that the Mughal emperors destroyed the temples because Islam and Muslims are theologically oriented towards "enforcing their religion on all those whom they had conquered."

Thus within a span of four years after the annexation of Awadh, the British had introduced the controversy of Babur



having demolished a temple at the birthplace of Ram in their official records. Along with this, the administrative decision to erect a barrier within the Babri Masjid compound and earlier translations of Babur's memoirs by British writers, in which it was wrongly stated that the Mughal emperor visited Ayodhya in March 1528, and the myth was complete. The British, after suppressing the uprising of 1857-58, were in the process of cementing their stranglehold on India and could not afford to let the "mutual animosity" between the Hindus and Muslims die a natural death. The two had to remain warring forces. In such a situation, the decision to erect the iron grill fence within the Babri Masjid, was symbolic of the British design to literally build a wall between the two communities. The divide between the two communities was further widened by a succession of books by official British historians and other documents. The string of gazetteers that followed — the Oudh Gazetteer and the Imperial Gazetteer — only aided the transformation of popular belief about the Babri Masjid into history.

By early twentieth century, there was little doubt in the minds of the British that the dispute at Ayodhya had no solution. The administrators were only interested in containing the dispute to prevent it from coming to a boil. This period was also marked by hectic political activity in the subcontinent. Even as the nationalist forces were gaining ground, religious revivalism was also beginning to rear its head. Meanwhile, Ayodhya had by now become an important Hindu pilgrimage. The Vaishnavs had total sway over the town, with the British openly referring to it as a Hindu township while Faizabad was getting the image of being a Muslim town. With Hindu revivalism, a dominant trend in Ayodhya in the decades bordering the turn of the century, several new temples came up. Rulers of smaller states built ashrams and temples in Ayodhya, primarily for people of their region to stay in, when they came for pilgrimage. Fairs became common as traders were quick to seize the opportunity of making a quick buck. A British document has recorded that the

fairs also became a "frequent source" of epidemics. But, that did not deter Hindu revivalism in Ayodhya and as the number of temples swelled, a need was felt in 1902 to identify the major temples that marked the various spots in Ram's life. This committee identified nearly 150 temples that were supposed to mark various episodes in Ram's life, and money was collected to put up stone inscriptions to mark these places. One such inscription was also put up on the eastern entrance of the Babri Masjid. It read: 'Shri Ram Janmabhoomi.' The British officials did not object to the stone-mark on the main gate of the mosque. This was another instance of the British siding with the Hindu revivalists in Ayodhya, an association that had started during the uprising of 1857-58 when the *bairagi* priests of Hanuman Garhi had sheltered the British from the rebels.

However, there were no fresh clashes between the Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya on the old dispute over the shrine. But, religious fundamentalism, a growing trend all over India, had its impact on the situation in Ayodhya also and in 1912-13 the town was rocked by communal violence. The issue however, was not the Babri Masjid, but cow slaughter. Even as the town returned to normalcy, the communal situation in the region was fast deteriorating. By the time the United Provinces elections were held in 1926, communalism had come to stay as one of the important political factors in India. Conflicts between the two communities continued as Hindu revivalists adopted their cow-slaughter campaign with greater virulence, and Muslims in some parts persisted with the sacrifice of cows at least on ceremonial occasions. There was fresh tension in Ayodhya in April 1934, on the day of Id-uz-Zuha. The Muslims wanted to sacrifice a cow and sought the permission of the local administration. The Chairman of the Municipal Board and the District Magistrate were petitioned, and permission was given because the Chairman, Dhani Ram, a devout Hindu, found no reason to object to the sacrifice. But after the sacrifice was over, the *bairagis* once again marched to the Babri Masjid and took over the shrine. The zealots

started destroying the mosque and by the time the police arrived after a gap of nearly two hours, the domes of the mosque had been destroyed. However, further destruction of the Babri Masjid was prevented, and the local administration promptly instituted an inquiry which found the Hindus responsible for the riots. The local Hindus were fined and the total amount of more than one lakh rupees was used for the repair of the mosque. The Muslims got back the control of the Babri Masjid and for the next few years the dispute was between the Shias and the Sunnis — the two Muslim sects — over the control of the mosque. However, the court ruled in favour of the Sunnis even though members of both sects continued to offer prayers here. Barring a few occasions when the local Hindus tried to prevent the Muslims from congregating at the Babri Masjid, status quo was maintained till 1949 when the story of Ayodhya took a dramatic turn.

### **The Early History**

The early history of Ayodhya is bereft of the kind of action witnessed in the town since the middle of the nineteenth century. Both a contemporary historian and an early account in a British gazetteer assert that it is difficult to piece together the history of the town in the ancient periods. The contemporary study states: "A historical study of Ayodhya in the ancient period is difficult because of the scanty and doubtful evidence available. There are long gaps which cannot be substantiated by archaeological, epigraphic or literary data. We have some evidence, but it provides only the most cursory insight into the past".<sup>19</sup> However, the British gazetteer does not elaborate on the problems of detailing the early history of Ayodhya but merely says that the "early history of the district is purely legendary".<sup>20</sup>

Part of the problem of piecing together a cogent history of ancient Ayodhya is the absence of a Hindu tradition of writing historical accounts. Instead Hindu history is confined to writing mere eulogies of the rulers. Given the fact that the custom of

systematically recording events started in real earnest in India only after the advent of the Muslims, a coherent history of Ayodhya can be pieced together only from the twelfth century A.D. However, there has been a great deal of confusion among scholars regarding the location of the mythological Ayodhya. While some argue that the contemporary town is not the place referred to in Valmiki's epic, others swear to the contrary. One of the factors that has led to this difference of opinion is the lack of evidence of early human settlement in Ayodhya. Two archaeological teams — one led by scholars of the Benaras Hindu University and the other partly sponsored by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) — have conducted systematic expeditions in contemporary Ayodhya. Both concur that human settlement in Ayodhya can be dated from the beginning of the seventh century B.C. This fact has been disconcerting not only for the scholars arguing in favour of the mythological Ayodhya being the contemporary town, but also for the supporters of the Hindutva idea, as it questions their belief of the historicity of Ram's character. This discomfort is most apparent in the writings of Professor B. B. Lal, who led the ASI sponsored archaeological expedition to Ayodhya in the mid-'70s, and has recently been one of the proponents of the 'temple demolition-mosque building' theory put forward by the VHP. At a time when the agitation for the Ram temple at Ayodhya was in its infancy in 1985-86, Lal wrote: "This site (Lal's team excavated fourteen sites at Ayodhya including one trench behind the Babri Masjid) may go back to the beginning of the seventh century B.C. at the earliest. This indeed, is very uncomfortable evidence, for no one had expected the beginnings of Ayodhya to be as late as that, particularly when one considers that the Painted Gray Ware associated with Mahabharat sites like Hastinapur, etc, antedated Ayodhya".<sup>21</sup>

Predictably, the scholars who contributed to the view that the geographical location of the mythological Ayodhya was not in the modern township, cited the lack of archaeological evidence

and interpreted the various verses of the epic to present their case. This led to a furious debate that has still not abated even though the parameters of the academic argument have altered dramatically with the growing power of the Hindutva idea. Lal has been one of the staunchest defenders of the theory that today's Ayodhya is the city of yore. He stated: "Spearheading this attack on the generally accepted identification of the site, even now known as Ayodhya in Faizabad district, UP, with that of Valmiki Ramayan, M.C. Joshi, one of the directors of ASI, published a paper in 1978 in the *Puratattva*, in which he sought to make out a case that Ayodhya was a mythical city, by referring to certain verses from 'Taittiriya Aranyaka'. After fully examining these verses as well as other references in Vedic literature, the present writer showed that these verses did not contain any allusion to a city called Ayodhya. On the contrary, the word 'ayodhya' was found to have been used in the sense of 'invincible', and the reference in these verses was to the human body which, as abode of god, is invincible".<sup>22</sup> There are also scholars who believe that the city of Saket, frequently mentioned in the ancient Buddhist texts can be identified with Ayodhya. Moreover, the Jain texts also mention a city, variously called Vishaka, Viniya or Vinit, which can also be identified with Ayodhya. There are other sources which refer to the town as Kosala, Maha Kosala, Ishkvakupuram, Rampuri and even Ramjanma-bhoomi.

Whatever the actual position regarding the identification of contemporary Ayodhya with the mythological city, it has evoked great interest since the beginning of the nineteenth century and led to the British conducting the first archaeological survey in 1862-63 and later following it up with another in 1889-91. The first survey, conducted by A. Cunningham, concluded that the city of Saket and Vishaka were identical to Ayodhya. Cunningham did not find any remains of ancient Hindu temples, though he found the remains of Buddhist structures. However, Cunningham followed the mythological belief that Ayodhya was the

city mentioned in the Ramayan. A. Fuhrer, who conducted the next survey, also arrived at similar conclusions, though there are indications that his was a less intensive survey and based heavily on the findings of Cunningham. However, it is relevant that both the surveys failed to find remains of any ancient Hindu temple at Ayodhya. All temple-like structures were Buddhist in character, and this is underscored by the writings of the Chinese travellers Fa'Hien and Huen T'sang who visited Ayodhya (called O-yu-To in their writings) and described the existence of many Buddhist Devpalas.

The next archaeological expedition in Ayodhya was led by Professor A. K. Narayan of Benaras Hindu University in 1969-70. His findings indicated that the signs of habitation were not older than the fifth century B.C., and that there was a strong Buddhist presence in the medieval period. However, the last expedition led by Lal was the most extensive as it was a part of the ASI's Project Ramayan launched in 1975 to excavate the sites mentioned in the epic. This project was launched by the ASI after its success with the excavation of the sites of the Mahabharat. Fourteen sites in Ayodhya were excavated, which included places like Janmabhoomi and Sita Rasoi, as well as other places mentioned in the epic like Sringaverpur, Bharadvaj Ashram and Chitrakoot. The evidence from all the trenches did not indicate human settlement pre-dating the beginning of the seventh century B.C. and also indicated the absence of any significant settlement between the third and the eleventh centuries A.D. In the initial stages of the agitation for the Ram temple, the spearheads of the agitation maintained that the temple that had been demolished, was built during the Gupta period by Vikramaditya. However, the archaeological findings negated this theory, as Lal recorded: "It is rather remarkable that the Gupta period is not significantly indicated at the site".<sup>23</sup>

From Lal's findings it is clear that while Ayodhya came to be an important urban centre in the third century B.C. — there was evidence of fortification — it declined in the early medieval

period and ceased to be an important place after the third century A.D. However, the archaeological evidence contradicts the association of Ayodhya with Saket and that of the kingdom of Kosala. The common belief that Saket is another name for Ayodhya is challenged in some texts which identify Saket with Sravasti, the capital of Kosala. Sravasti was located north west of Ayodhya on the border of the modern districts of Gonda and Bahraich. By all accounts, it is safe to presume that after the beginning of human settlement, Ayodhya emerged as an important urban centre of the Kosala empire — which embraced the area in eastern UP — and later started declining from the third century A.D. as indicated by Lal's archaeological findings. However, there is a claim that the town of Saket was "renamed" Ayodhya by a Gupta king, Skanda Gupta, in the late fifth century A.D. who moved his residence to Saket and called it Ayodhya. But this theory is not backed by the archaeological evidence. Indeed, the basic problem in tracing the early history of Ayodhya is that when there is epigraphic proof, it is not backed by either literary or archaeological evidence, and when there is literary evidence, it is not backed by any other. This contradiction becomes more apparent in the writings of the Chinese traveller Huen T'sang, who left China in 629 A.D. and returned in 645 A.D. He visited Ayodhya (called O-yu-To in his accounts) when it was a part of the kingdom of Kannauj under the reign of King Harsha. He wrote about the prosperity of Ayodhya and stated that it was a famous Buddhist place. Conceding that it was possible for Ayodhya to have been a significant Buddhist centre during this period even though there is no archaeological evidence to buttress the argument, there is evidence to show that after Harsha's death, north India split up into small kingdoms and as Ayodhya's importance further declined that of Kannauj grew. As a result, the "period 650-1050 is practically blank for Ayodhya," leaving immense space and scope over four centuries for the propagation of myths.

The shroud of haze that surrounds the history of Ayodhya in

the early medieval period, started slowly lifting from the time when the Turks succeeded in penetrating the area in the eleventh century. Kannauj was invaded by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni in 1018-19, and that started a long period of invasions and retreats by the Turks. For nearly two centuries, the area under the kingdom of Kannauj remained in a state of fluidity — as the Turks invaded and after their retreat, the local Hindu rulers succeeded in regaining control of the kingdom, only to be humbled again by the next band of invaders. But, after the first attack on Kannauj, the next target was the provincial headquarters of Bari and this was followed by an attack on Ayodhya. There are records that state that the first Turk attack on Ayodhya was led by Saiyad Salar Masud Ghazni, whose tomb is in Bahraich. An account says: "After the rains, Masud led his army against Ajudhan. Although in those days that place and its vicinity was thickly populated, it was subdued without a struggle. Masud was delighted with the climate of Ajudhan and, as it was a good hunting ground, he remained there till the end of the following rains when he set off for Delhi".<sup>24</sup> This account underscores two points: First, that Ayodhya had not been abandoned, and second, it did not have a significant military presence to either ward off the invaders or to put up even a semblance of defence.

The first attack on Ayodhya was probably followed by another attack, this time by one of the chieftains of Ahmad Niyaltigin, the governor of Punjab then who represented the invaders from Ghazni. But after the Turks withdrew from the area, the Hindu kingdom re-grouped and ruled Ayodhya from Kannauj. However, the city of Kannauj was again invaded in 1086 and 1090 and this was followed by a change of guard in Kannauj when the Rajput clan of Gahadavalas headed by Chandradeya came to power in the kingdom. Since Ayodhya does not show any signs of any powerful ruler — even a strong local chieftain — it can be presumed that Ayodhya also came under the control of the Rajputs. The leaders of the VHP have claimed that the



temple that was destroyed to build the Babri Masjid was constructed during this period and cite the artefacts that surfaced after the demolition as evidence for their argument. However, for lack of official and academic comment on the nature of artefacts, it is difficult to state whether the VHP claim is true or false. The new rulers had a period of relative tranquillity till 1190, when the Turks again became active in the area. Ayodhya was attacked in 1198 by Mohammed Ghori, accompanied by Makhdum Shah Juran Ghori. There is a British account which says that several Hindu places of worship were destroyed during this attack on Ayodhya.<sup>25</sup>

### **Stability Eludes Ayodhya**

However, political stability continued to elude Ayodhya even after its conquest by Mohammed Ghori. In 1228, the third Mamluk Sultan of Delhi, Shams-ud-din Iltutmish, appointed his son, Malik Nasir-ud-din Mahmud, as the governor of Awadh — thereby providing Ayodhya with a semblance of political stability. There was some initial resistance spearheaded by the Bhars, especially in South Awadh and Bundelkhand, but by 1247 all forms of resistance to the Delhi Sultanate had been contained. Ayodhya witnessed, at this stage, rapid development and the town came to be used by the newly appointed governor of Awadh as a base for “northern expansion”. The Turks, after having seized control in Awadh, were now eager to start expanding their area of control further. The town was fortified, garrisons were stationed, and towards the end of the thirteenth century, a wall that encircled the town was constructed. This followed the building of a fort in the town. William Finch, the earliest European traveller who visited Ayodhya between 1608-11, mentioned that the wall was built nearly 400 years before his visit to Ayodhya. The town became more prosperous during the reign of the Tughlaqs, as administrative and defence personnel were stationed in the town and quarters were built to ac-

commodate the new officials. During the tenure of Mohammed-bin-Tughlaq, several members of the ruling elite of Delhi, chose to settle in Awadh and this was the time when the fort of Ayodhya was completed. By the fourteenth century, Ayodhya had become a part of the Sharqi kingdom of Jaunpur, but the hold did not last for long, as Ayodhya was recovered by the Lodis.

When the Lodi empire fell following the defeat of Ibrahim Lodi in the battle of Panipat, Babur, after gaining control of the Sultanate, embarked on a further expansionist tour and camped at a place on the banks of the river Ghagra, now called Saryu. This fact has been the source of the prevalent view that Babur visited Ayodhya in 1528 when he is supposed to have ordered the demolition of the temple and the construction of the mosque. But the Mughal control did not last for long as Humayun was defeated by Sher Shah Suri, an Afghan. Soon after, however, Humayun regained control of Delhi. But, Awadh and Jaunpur continued to be in the control of the Afghans and it was not till 1559, when Akbar embarked on an expansionist drive in the East, that the two kingdoms came under the control of Delhi. Akbar's tenure is particularly important for Ayodhya as this was the time when Sufism and the medieval Bhakti poets prospered. This was also the time when Ayodhya grew as a religious place and Tulsidas composed the Ram Charit Manas. There are also accounts of Guru Nanak having visited Ayodhya during this period, and the place from where he is supposed to have addressed a congregation is marked by a modern gurdwara (a Sikh place of worship).

By the time Akbar died in 1605, Ayodhya had started becoming an important religious place for the Hindus. Even as different religious traditions grew in the town, it came to be an important pilgrimage for the Hindus and led to the compilation of the first of the *Mahatmyas* (guide-books for pilgrims, compiled since the 16th century). At the time of Jehangir's reign, the identification of Ayodhya with Ram was complete and this is borne out by the accounts of William Finch who wrote of the tales that he had

heard about Ram and his association with Ayodhya. However, he did not make any mention of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple that had been destroyed by Babur to build the mosque. Critics of the VHP have also argued that if Babur had indeed destroyed the temple, then Tulsidas, who wrote and lived in Ayodhya, would have surely mentioned the events that were purported to have happened barely 50 years before the poet started recounting the escapades of Ram. Aurangzeb seized the throne in 1658, his tenure being marked by the demolition of some temples in Ayodhya. But after his death in the first decade of the eighteenth century, when frequent changes in the seat of command in Delhi diminished its political authority, anarchy prevailed in Awadh for nearly two decades.

Stability returned to Awadh only in the third decade of the 18th century when the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah appointed Mohammad Amin, a merchant from Khorasan, as the governor. A Shia of Persian stock, Mohammad Amin was given the titles of Sadat Khan Bahadur and Burhan-ul-Mulk, and he settled in Ayodhya and established the township of Faizabad. Two provinces of Awadh and Allahabad were carved out of the kingdom and the governor fought the Marathas and the forces of Nadir Shah. Sadat Khan also rebuilt the old fort of Ayodhya and called it Qila Mubarak and during his tenure several Hindu temples were built. This was also the time when Vaishnavism started making its presence felt in Ayodhya and several *akharas* or sects, mushroomed within the Ramanandi community. Clashes with the Shaivite priests also became common and in one of these, one of the new *akharas*, the Nirwani *akhara* seized control of the Hanuman Garhi temple — the biggest temple in Ayodhya at the time — by driving out the Shaivite priests who had controlled the temple till that time. By the time Sadat Khan's tenure ended in 1739, Hindu revivalism was a significant force in Ayodhya, and this trend continued during the tenure of his successor, Safdar Jang, too.

Safdar Jang moved his court from Ayodhya to Faizabad,

placed the old capital in the administrative control of one of his Hindu ministers, Naval Rai, who in turn was sympathetic to the rising *akharas* within the *Ramanandi* (followers of Ram) community. While the Nawab pursued his expansionist desires, Ayodhya was the seat of fervent Hindu revivalist activity. Naval Rai also contributed to this by building several new buildings along the banks of the river Saryu. Vaishnavites became very active and several settlements of sadhus sprang up. A British account provides a list of more than 200 Hindu religious establishments that came up during this period.<sup>26</sup> At the death of Safdar Jang, the kingdom passed into the hands of Shuja-ud-Daulah who initially governed the kingdom from Lucknow, and later shifted back to Faizabad in the 1760s. The new Nawab teamed up with other local rulers to resist the British expansionist aims, and fought them first in the Battle of Buxar and again in a place called Jajmau, near Kanpur, when the British handed over Allahabad to Shah Alam, the Mughal emperor of the time, after seizing it from Shuja-ud-Daulah. A Treaty with the British followed, and while the Delhi Sultanate was to retain Awadh, greater parts of the Benaras division was to be given to the British. This Treaty however, was not accepted by the Court of Directors of the East India Company which restored everything to the Sultanate except the districts south of the Ganga. Shuja-ud-Daulah also had to give Rs 50 lakh to the British and the chastened Nawab returned to Faizabad where he built a fort and improved the conditions in the city. During Shuja-ud-Daulah's tenure, the *akharas* of the *Ramanandi* community came to acquire a powerful position. But political turbulence continued in India and this affected Awadh also. The kingdom of Awadh became insecure following the Marathas seizing control of Allahabad, and this forced the Nawab to petition the British for help. Sir Robert Baker was given the charge of defending Awadh and Rohilkhand in return for Rs 1 lakh a month. Finally the Marathas were driven out and Shuja-ud-Daulah agreed to pay the British an outright sum of Rs 50 lakh and a substantial

annual fee also. The British were clever in realising that the Nawab, of Shia stock, was keen to shake off the control of the Sunni rulers of Delhi, and the fact that after the Battle of Buxar, Shuja-ud-Daulah had come to terms with the superior position of the British. In 1773, he conceded the Fort of Chunar and agreed to station a permanent Resident in Awadh, giving away control of his foreign policy. In this period the kingdom came to have great significance in the future plans of the British in India. The British began to view it as the gateway to north India, and this became more apparent with the annexation of Awadh in 1856.

By the time Asaf-ud-Daulah succeeded Shuja-ud-Daulah in 1775, Awadh was virtually controlled by the British. He shifted his capital to Lucknow after falling out with his mother and grandmother. The two continued to stay at Faizabad and succeeded in retaining a significant portion of the kingdom's wealth. By the time Asaf-ud-Daulah died in 1797, the British had established a direct line of communication with the Bahi Begum in Faizabad, who feared that after her death the Nawabs would not look after the mausoleum and the estate. She signed a Treaty with the British shortly before her death in 1814 that gave revenue and administrative control of Ayodhya to the British. While the British control of Ayodhya coincided with the growth of militant Vaishnavite sects in Ayodhya and the dissemination of the story of the demolition of the Janmasthan temple to build the mosque, in Lucknow, the British were openly interfering in the running of the *darbar*. This is best underscored by the participative role the British played in the battle for succession after the death of Asaf-ud-Daulah in 1797. The Nawab was succeeded by his son, Wazir Ali, but the British sided with the rival claimant, Saadat Ali Khan, the former Nawab's brother, because Wazir Ali exhibited traces of dissent while Saadat Ali presented a docile facade. The British publicly maintained that the new Nawab was not the legitimate son of Asaf-ud-Daulah, but there are no doubts about the real motivation of the British. Another Treaty was signed and another fort handed over to the British,

even as the Nawabs of Awadh continued their total dependence on the imperial rulers. However, Saadat Ali Khan had a good tenure in economic terms and when he died in 1814, Rs 14 crore was in the royal treasury. While the next Nawab, who died in 1827, spent Rs four crore out of this, the next in line, Nasir-ud-Din, was a spendthrift, and a person whom the British described as a debauch and a person who aped the British and their ways. By the time he died in 1837, only Rs 70 lakh was left in the royal treasury. The East India Company once again installed a Nawab of their choice and finally Nasir-ud-Din's grandson, Wajid Ali Shah, was the last Nawab of Awadh. He also was a lavish spender and accounts say that he spent Rs 20 lakh more than his income every year.

The story of the Awadh court from the time Shuja-ud-Daulah became Nawab presents two important aspects of the growth of Ayodhya. First, the total lack of interest on the part of the rulers and, secondly, keen participation of the British in the events unfolding in Ayodhya. This becomes all the more evident if one keeps the anti-British riots in Bareilly in the backdrop and fears of another anti-British platform building up in the north.

We have seen that by the time the Hindus and Muslims had a series of violent clashes in Ayodhya in the period 1853-55, popular belief had grown that Babur had destroyed a temple to build the mosque, and this had been bolstered by British accounts that paid scant attention in verifying the stories before writing. By this time the British were also openly interfering in the *darbar* politics of Awadh and dictating policies to the Nawabs. Awadh had by then become a central theme of the East India Company's north Indian policy. Yet when the clashes broke out the "king's men" watched from the ringside, but "had orders not to act".<sup>27</sup>

However, every confrontation since the first clash has centred around the story of Babur having visited Ayodhya in April 1528 and built the mosque — either after demolishing an existing temple, or by building it over the remains of an earlier temple,

or even building it at a site where there was no previous structure. Whatever the merits of the various contentions, the moot point that emerges from various primary and secondary accounts on the actions of Babur and his life is that his image was not anything like that of Aurangzeb. Known to be “a fine soldier, an able administrator and a prolific writer, he was not a religious fanatic in any way”.<sup>28</sup> The Babur-Nama, an autobiographical account, reveals his God-fearing nature and his tolerance of religions other than Islam. There are instances in the book when Babur praises Hindu architecture and sculpture that was associated with the temples, though there are also instances of his disapproval of nude idols. There is also no mention of “any incident when he or his men ever destroyed any Hindu temple”.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, in the version of his memoirs that is available now, there is also no record of Babur ever having visited Ayodhya. The Babur-Nama is blank from April 2 to September 8, 1528 and the pages appear to have been lost through the ages. In one of the last entries before the missing record of a period of slightly more than five months, Babur recorded that on March 28, 1528 he and his forces were stationed north of Awadh at a junction of two rivers. One of the two rivers is the river Ghagra — also known as Saryu when it nears Ayodhya — and at the point of its confluence with another river is considered to be barely a few miles from Ayodhya. It has been assumed by the proponents of the Babur myth that he visited Ayodhya —since by then it was an important place — in these five months of which there is no record, ordered the demolition of the temple and asked his minister Mir Baaqi to construct a mosque in its place. With formal records of Babur’s life in these five months missing, the history of this period is largely based on popular stories and incorrect interpretations by British writers. Contemporary accounts as well as local Hindus and Muslims contend that Babur built the mosque after demolishing the temple on the advice of a Muslim *faqir*. However, as we have seen earlier, this myth grew and

spread only in the nineteenth century as till then the mosque was not referred to as the Babri Masjid. The perpetuation of the belief was aided by British scholars and other administrators as they propagated the story as factual history. Among the first of these efforts was by John Leyden who translated Babur's memoirs and while stating that accounts of the period between April and September 1528, were missing, suggested that Babur visited Ayodhya on March 28. It naturally followed that since after his arrival in Ayodhya, records were missing, there must be some event which either Babur or one of his successors, through whose hands the Babur-Nama passed, wished to blot out from the records. The demolition theory seemed to be the most plausible one at this stage. Leyden was followed by Montgomery Martin who talked about the black pillars that were obviously un-Islamic in character and stated that they must have been taken from a Hindu temple. The trend of giving credence to the popular belief continued, and in 1854 another translation of the Babur-Nama, done by William Erskine, also contended that the Mughal emperor had visited Ayodhya on March 28, 1528. So far the British writers had written that Babur visited Ayodhya on this day, and that the records of the next five months were missing. But in 1860, after Hindus and Muslims had clashed in Ayodhya and a compromise had been worked out between the warring groups, P. Carnegey, who wrote a gazetteer, linked facts with popular beliefs and wrote that Babur had actually destroyed the temple. A similar view was expressed by W.C. Benet a few years later. By this time British archaeologists, Cunningham and Fuhrer, had recorded their findings and, as we have seen earlier, they too mentioned the local belief. By the end of the nineteenth century, the mosque had emerged as the bone of contention between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya with British writers and archaeologists aiding the spread of the belief that Babur had visited Ayodhya in 1528. The British writers were convinced that Babur visited Ayodhya and had been involved in some mysterious activity there."



This fallacy was somewhat corrected in 1921, when Mrs Annette Susannah Beveridge translated the Babur-Nama and contended that Babur had been stationed at a considerable distance north of Ayodhya on March 28, 1558. However, by then the popular story had been accepted as factual history and in a footnote Mrs Beveridge wrote that Babur would surely have been impressed by the "dignity and sanctity of the ancient Hindu shrine" and would have at least partially demolished it to build the mosque. The logic through which Mrs Beveridge evolved her conclusions was the commonly held British viewpoint that Hindus and Muslims were naturally antagonistic, and that the Mughal emperor like an "obedient follower of Muhammed was in intolerance of another faith and thus he would regard the substitution of the temple by a mosque as dutiful and worthy." Several historians of eminence in India have asserted that "Mrs Beveridge produces no historical evidence"<sup>30</sup> to support her conclusion and that the inference is "deduced from a generalised presumption about the nature and inevitable behaviour of a person professing a particular faith".<sup>31</sup>

It has also been recently argued that Babur did not visit Ayodhya at all.<sup>32</sup> This conclusion is arrived at by an analysis of his memoirs and the assertion that in 1528, Babur "was more involved in the task of consolidating his kingdom than in serving the interests of his religion".<sup>33</sup> But, regardless of the fact whether Babur ever visited Ayodhya or not, the point is that the mosque that was demolished on December 6, 1992 came to be regarded as a mosque built by his minister, Mir Baqi, either on the orders of the emperor or on his own initiative to dedicate it to his king. Those arguing in favour of identifying the mosque with Babur have cited the three Persian inscriptions on the mosque — two were on the outer wall and the other in its inner precincts. While the inscriptions on the outer wall were barely legible, the one inside, dated 1529, was translated by Mrs Beveridge and reads: "By the order of the Emperor Babur whose justice is an edifice reaching upto the very heights of heaven;

**The good hearted Mir Baqi built this alighting place of angels;  
May his goodness last forever!"**

However, there has also been a view that Babur's name was associated with the mosque in the early decades of the nineteenth century by the Muslims of Ayodhya, to counter the claim of the Hindus on the shrine. An analysis of the style of calligraphy on the inscriptions have been found to bear similarities with the style prevalent in the nineteenth century, and not of the earlier period. There is an argument that mentions the "strong possibility of the stone inscriptions being put up at a later stage to strengthen the claim that Babur had built the mosque".<sup>34</sup> The direction that this studied view takes also answers one of the earliest arguments of the leaders of the Hindutva idea, that the structure in question was not a mosque because of the absence of minarets. It has been said that the mosque in Ayodhya was similar to another mosque in nearby Jaunpur that belonged to the Sharqi period. Ayodhya had also come under the control of the Sharqi sultans, albeit briefly, before the advent of the Mughals, and there are suggestions that the mosque that came to be identified as the Babri Masjid was actually built during this period. But that once the Hindus started threatening it, Muslims resorted to the invocation of Babur's name to ensure that the mosque remained in their control. Whatever the story of the Babri Masjid, there is literally little left now except the debris of the shrine. And, of course, the hastily erected makeshift structure...

## **Beginning of an End**

Following the riots of 1934 and the subsequent decision of the local administration to fine the local Hindus and utilise the money for the repair of the Babri Masjid, relations between the Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya started rapidly deteriorating to the point of no return. The escalating tensions between the two communities had greatly to do with the conflict between the

Hindus and Muslims all over India. But in Ayodhya, the thorny issue of the Babri Masjid remained the proverbial eye of the storm. By the 1940s, Vaishnavism had come to have complete sway over the Shaivites in Ayodhya. Several *akharas* were also prospering financially as a large number of *mahants* also managed, with the earnings from the temples, to buy land in nearby areas. Hindu militancy was now an accepted fact in the town, and there were reports that there had been attempts to prevent the Muslims from offering *namaz* at the Babri Masjid. But, in spite of threats, Muslims continued to live in Ayodhya and offer *namaz* in the Babri Masjid. However, the situation started deteriorating swiftly after the Partition of the subcontinent. Communal frenzy was at its peak all over the country and in January 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a fanatic Hindu. The assassin, Nathuram Godse, had previously been a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

That was the period when militant Hindu priests started making preparations to seize control of the Babri Masjid once again. Again, attempts to prevent Muslims from offering prayers at the mosque were made, and if they did come the crowd would be stoned from rooftops of the houses belonging to Hindus. The police, stationed at the site took scant notice of these attacks. The Babri Masjid was then being managed by the Uttar Pradesh Central Sunni Board of Waqfs and reports of the impending threat to the Masjid reached its headquarters. The Board deputed one of its inspectors, Mohammed Ibrahim, to visit Ayodhya and assess the situation in the town. His report, dated December 10, 1948 states: "Hindus do not read the Ramayan during the day. During the night if any Muslim was to stay in the mosque, Hindus and others would trouble them. Any Muslim going towards the mosque is accosted and called names. I went to the mosque and realised that many of the rumours are true. There is danger to the mosque from the Hindus. It appears that an application be lodged with the Deputy Commissioner Faizabad, requesting those coming for *namaz* should not be troubled and

since the masjid is Waqf property, it should be protected.”<sup>35</sup>

This visit had followed that of a leading Hindu priest, Baba Sukhdas, who in his speeches in the town had repeatedly asked the *bairagis* and other Hindus in a *jordar* (forceful) tone to seize control of the Babri Masjid. But the Waqf inspector's report and the subsequent petition to the local administration to provide protection to the Muslims going to the Babri Masjid had no effect as Mohammed Ibrahim was back in Ayodhya in less than two weeks on December 23. His second report indicated the growing militancy in the ranks of the Hindu priests. Recitations of the Ramayan had started, and the graveyard where more than 70 Muslims had been buried after the clash of 1855, was being dug up. The report said that while the graveyard was being dug up, policemen were present at the site. But only four people were arrested and they were all released shortly on bail. The *mazar* of a Sufi saint in the vicinity was also dug up and a flag was hoisted at the place by a *bairagi*. The manager of the mosque was beaten up, as were two Muslims from outside Ayodhya. The mosque by this time was locked up most of the time and the keys were with the Muslims. On Friday afternoons, the mosque would be opened for two or three hours, cleaned and, after *namaz*, it would be locked again. The report stated that when the Muslims left “a lot of noise is created and from the surrounding houses, shoes and stones are hurled. The Muslims, out of fear, do not utter a word. I have spent the night in Ayodhya and the *bairagis* are sure to forcibly take possession of the masjid.”

But even this report did not stir the administration. Matters continued like this for close to a year. The graveyard was levelled, Friday *namaz* at the Babri Masjid became a fearful matter for the Muslims, and threats of the imminent takeover of the mosque were increasing. By November 1949, the crisis was close to a flashpoint. *Harijan*, the magazine started by Mahatma Gandhi, reported the plight of the Muslims of Ayodhya in its July issue, 1950. The report, written by K.G. Mahruwala, is a graphic account of the hazards of being a Muslim in Ayodhya

in the aftermath of India attaining Independence. It is also a comprehensive record of the pro-Hindu character of the local administration. The report states: "In the middle of this graveyard was a foundation known among the Muslims as Kunati Masjid. A platform was being raised on its site. The Muslims were full of fear. Under Section 145 of the CrPC, they made a petition to the City Magistrate, but no action was taken."

At this point of time, a crucial role was played by Akshay Brahmachari, a secretary of the Faizabad District Congress Committee. After having seen the events in front of the Babri Masjid, he met the District Magistrate, K.K. Nayar, to seek his intervention. The report in the *Harijan* continues: "This led to a curious result. Two days later, three men entered his house (Brahmachari's) and made an attack on him. From what they said, it was found that they knew what had transpired between him and the D.M. Ultimately, Section 144 of the CrPC was promulgated, but it was used only to prevent the Muslims from going to the place. The Hindus could go freely."

Meanwhile, the mood of the Hindus in Ayodhya was slowly turning into a frenzy. A continuous recitation of the Ramayan was being carried out outside the Babri Masjid. The *Harijan* report continues: "This was followed by some days of feasting and distribution of food in front of the Babri Masjid. Propaganda was carried on for this purpose through loudspeakers installed in the tongas and motorcars proclaiming that the birthplace of Ram was being regained and people should visit it for *darshan*. People went in hundreds. Speeches were delivered telling people that the Babri Masjid was to be converted into a Ram Mandir. Government officials were attending the recitations. Some more old tombs and holy places were demolished and idols of Hindu gods were installed in their place. The people thought that all this was being done with the sanction of the government and must therefore be in order."

This phase of frenzied action in Ayodhya finally came to an end on the night of December 22-23, 1949 when a group of Hindu

devotees, after breaking open the gate segregating the mosque from the Ram Chabutra, entered the Babri Masjid and installed the idols of Ram and his associates. At that time there was a police picket consisting of 15 policemen positioned there since the area was under Section 144 of the CrPC, but there was no attempt to stop the mob from desecrating the mosque. Constable Mata Prasad, who arrived at the spot the next morning, submitted a report to the police station at Ayodhya. Subsequently, sub-inspector Ram Dubey lodged Mata Prasad's version as an FIR. It stated: "When I reached the Janmabhoomi around 8 o'clock in the morning, I came to know that a group of 50-60 persons had entered the Babri Masjid after breaking the compound gate or by jumping across the wall with a stair and established therein the idol of Shri Bhagwan and painted Sita Ram etc. on the outer and inner walls with *geru* (a local water colour normally used to paint flower pots and for wall writings). Hans Raj, who was on duty, asked them to defer but they did not. These persons had already entered the mosque before the available PAC guards could be commanded. Officials of the district administration came and involved themselves in making necessary arrangements. Afterwards, a crowd of five to six thousand gathered outside, chanting bhajans and raising slogans, tried to enter the mosque but were deterred and nothing untoward happened thereon because of proper arrangements."

What followed was the open complicity between the mosque breakers and the local administration. District Magistrate K.K. Nayar, whose role was already suspected as evident from the *Harijan* account, dispatched a brief message to the Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh on the morning of December 23, 1949. It read: "A few Hindus entered the Babri Masjid at night when the Masjid was deserted and installed a deity there. D.M. and S.P. and force at spot. Situation under control." The Chief Secretary and the Inspector General of UP Police issued instructions to immediately clear the idols from the mosque, but Nayar pleaded his inability because of the "suffering which it will entail

to many innocent lives." The Imam of the mosque, Abdul Ghafoor, was asked to leave the area, and Nayar ordered the mosque to be locked up. But before this he allowed four priests and one cook to enter the mosque and perform *arti* in the mornings and the evenings beneath the central dome of the mosque. Other Hindu devotees were allowed to have a *darshan* of the idols from outside the iron grill. Nayar also appointed Priya Dutt Sharma, chairman of the Faizabad Municipal Board, as the 'receiver' of the shrine to oversee its affairs, which included the appointment of a priest to conduct prayers. Muslims were shocked at the turn of events. A delegation went over to Delhi to meet the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who expressed anguish, but the local administration was steadfast in its position that the idols could not be removed. The mood in Ayodhya was clearly boisterous. The *Harijan* report continues: "Exciting speeches followed. Gandhiji, Congress governments, and Jawaharlal were maligned. The speakers said that there was not a temple left in Pakistan and so in Ayodhya too they should allow no masjid or burial ground to remain. Even some old Congressmen participated in this inciting propaganda. The argument was: 'A people's government had been established in Bharat.' This meant that what the majority liked must happen. Since 85 per cent of the population of Ayodhya did not like the mosque there, no one could remove the idol from that place."

What followed thereafter was farcical. An order under Section 145 of the CrPC was passed which permitted the worship of the idol but Muslims were disallowed from offering prayers in the mosque till the dispute was settled in court. A property that was legally in the control of the Waqf Board of the Sunni Muslims had been taken away which it now had to prove in a court of law. The *Harijan* commented: "The burden of a lingering litigation has been laid on them (the Muslims)." The protracted legal imbroglio is still not over even after more than four decades and the strain is clearly visible on the faces of the likes of Hashim Ansari who have virtually spent a lifetime trying to prove that

the ownership of what used to be the Babri Masjid was vested with the Muslims.

The conversion of the Babri Masjid into a Ram temple was not the only instance of discrimination against the Muslims of Ayodhya and Faizabad. A restaurant, named Star Hotel and located on the main square of Faizabad, was owned by a Muslim resident of the town. He had been an old nationalist Muslim and was boycotted by the Muslim League for his views. During Partition when the League was active in the campaign asking Muslims to migrate to Pakistan, this man expressed views contrary to the League's. However, one day the District Magistrate was informed that the restaurant was being used to store arms. A raid was conducted but nothing was found, yet four people found in the premises were arrested. The proprietor of the restaurant was asked to vacate the premises immediately and he complied with the order in the presence of the District Magistrate. The building was handed over to a Hindu trader who renamed the restaurant Gomati Hotel. The District Magistrate and other local officials were present at the inaugural function of the new hotel. Meanwhile, the old owner had to move court and it was much later that the restaurant was restored to him.

The *Harijan* also reported another serious incident, this time in Ayodhya: "A Muslim woman had died. Her relations commenced to dig the ground for her burial in a nearby graveyard. But some Hindus would not let them do so. The relations went to the City Magistrate (who had been appointed Receiver of the Babri Masjid). It was the duty of the magistrate to have helped them. Instead, he said, since the Hindus objected to the burial on that ground, they had better go to another. They complied and went elsewhere; but another batch of Hindus appeared on the spot and put their opposition to the burial taking place there. The City Magistrate, thereupon, asked them to go to a third one. In this way, they had to try one burial ground after another. There was opposition even in the third graveyard. In the



meanwhile, the corpse had started decomposing. Finally after an interval of 22 hours, obsequies were performed, but only somewhere outside the limits of Ayodhya. Similar treatment was meted out in respect of four other corpses. An intimidatory campaign has been started to prevent Muslims from burying their corpses inside Ayodhya." The role of Nayar was recognised by the spearheads of the campaign to convert the Babri Masjid into a Ram temple: His portrait used to adorn the walls of the Babri Masjid and he became a revered figure in all popular stories that the votaries of the Hindutva idea propagated to gain more supporters. Nayar also, on his part, soon quit service and joined politics. However, his role from early 1948 when the Hindus of Ayodhya stepped up the campaign to seize control of the Babri Masjid, to the forcible installation of the idol and the following decision to allow its worship but preventing the entry of Muslims in the vicinity of the mosque, laid the seed of a protracted Hindu-Muslim conflict in Independent India.

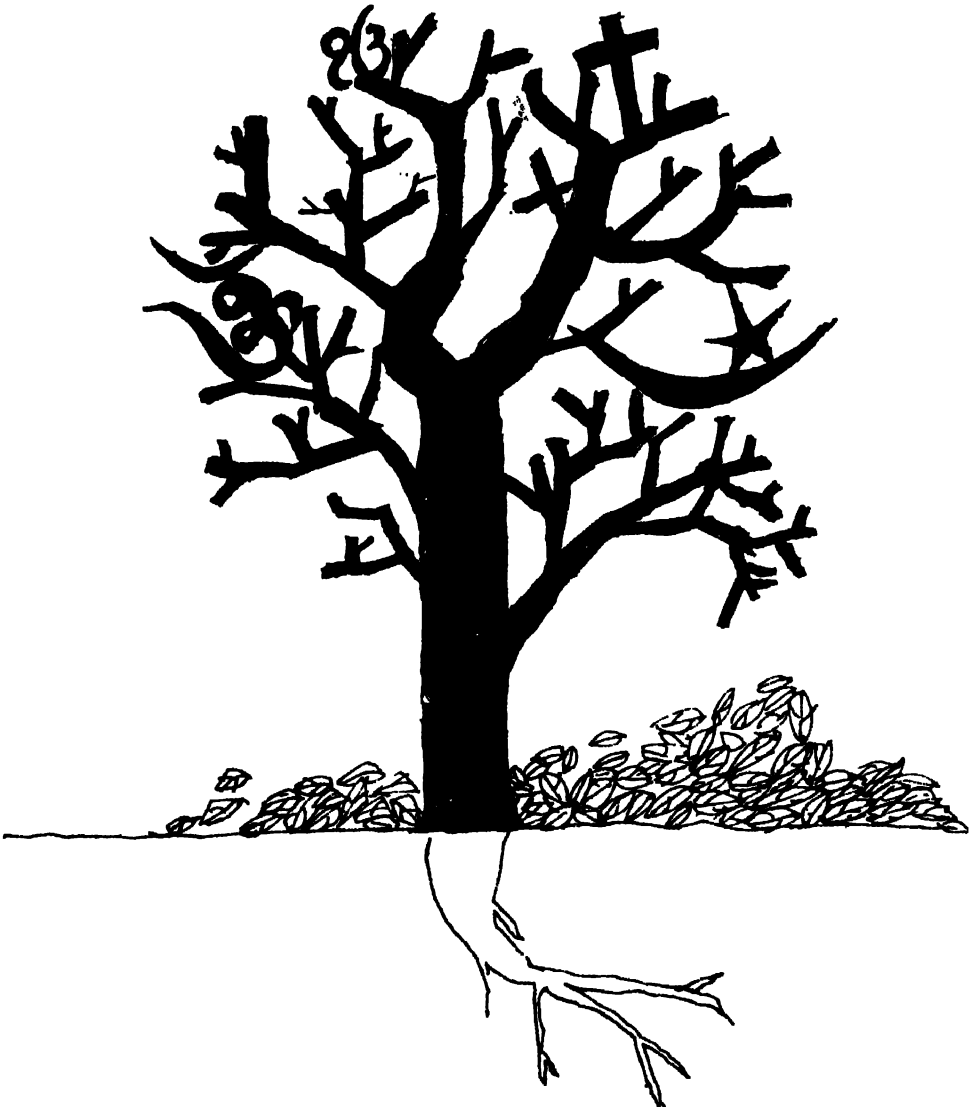
The irony is that while the political ancestors of the contemporary advocates of the Hindutva idea were active and planning every move in detail, the government remained in a state of paralysis. Govind Ballabh Pant, the Congress Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, during the course of a debate on the situation in Ayodhya, in the Legislative Assembly blandly stated: "If anything that was improper did take place, we tried to remedy it. We have regret for those who were put into distress on its account." Neither the Chief Minister, nor the Home Minister of the state, Lal Bahadur Shastri who later became Prime Minister, categorically condemned the installation of the idol. Even Nehru, in spite of assuring the delegation of Muslims from Faizabad that he would look into the matter, failed to act though he professed his belief in secularism. Nehru was concerned greatly at the events in Ayodhya but could do precious little. This was primarily because Nehru was under sharp attack from within his Cabinet over his perceived softness towards Pakistan. Nehru probably felt that a pro-Muslim act in regard to Ayodhya would

be seen by his critics as another instance of his failure to safeguard interests of Hindus. The collective somnambulism on the part of the Congress leaders seems to have set the pattern of governmental behaviour in years to come...



## CHAPTER 4

# Rājkāṇḍ



*'If someone were to strike at the root of this large tree here, it would bleed, but live. If someone were to strike at its stem, it would bleed, but live. Pervaded by the living Self that tree stands firm, drinking in its nourishment and rejoicing. But if life leaves one of its branches, that branch withers; if it leaves a second, that branch withers; if it leaves a third, that branch withers. If it leaves the whole tree, the whole tree withers...'*

From the Chandogya Upanishad

On January 11, 1993 the mood among the functionaries and leaders managing the affairs of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) headquarters in New Delhi was clearly upbeat. The previous evening, several leaders of the party, including the former president L.K. Advani, had been released from judicial custody as the examining magistrate found little substance in the police case filed against the leaders of the BJP, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Shortly after their release — they were kept in a government guest house in a small town several hours from Delhi — the leaders had boarded an elite super fast train and arrived in the capital late in the night. Advani addressed a news conference the next day where the entire press corps of the capital, including representatives of the foreign media, assembled on the lawns of the

ministerial bungalow which functions as the party's central office in the heart of Lutyens' Delhi. News conferences have always been of great importance to the BJP which has perfected the art of media management. Such occasions also provide an opportunity for the BJP leaders to gauge the mood of different sections of India as Indian journalists have adopted clear positions on the central theme of the BJP campaign, in the past few years. The media too in India has been divided between the section that is supportive of the policies of the BJP and the other which is not in agreement. Sharp exchange of words and diametrically opposite views come to the fore, as journalists argue with BJP leaders. While several senior BJP leaders hate such occasions and clearly show their dislike about being asked such leading questions, some feel that such grilling by the press, helps to hone their skills and arguments. They reason with their agitated colleagues that news conferences are a mini-India coloured by different viewpoints, and that there is no reason to avoid such confrontations.

But on January 11, 1993 there was no such confrontation as Advani was at his articulate best and his opening account left many wondering if there was any purpose to be served by asking further questions. There appeared to be a definite finality in every sentence that the BJP leader uttered. Showing every bit of the aggressive image that he had adopted few years ago, Advani dwelt at length on how his party had come to have a stranglehold on Indian polity. He explained that even though the agitation for the Ram temple was launched by the VHP in 1984, his party had stepped into the campaign much later in 1989. Advani elaborated that his party did not view the issue as merely the question of constructing a temple, in place of the mosque. But, for the BJP, the matter of contention was a much larger issue: The character of the country. Advani stated that his party had not only entered the campaign for the construction of the Ram temple, but had also actively canvassed for an alternate set of political values. These values, the BJP leader explained, included

the position of the minorities in the country and their response to the aspirations of the Hindu majority in India.

Advani categorically stated that in the course of the development centring around the Ayodhya dispute, the new notions thrown up by the BJP had come to the fore and now dominated the political theatre of India. The BJP was no longer hesitant about its real belief and Advani made it clear that those who did not agree with the BJP's arguments had little option but to either adopt the same values or explore extra-territorial options. Behind each of Advani's assertions was the firm belief that in the years to come, his party and the Hindutva idea that it believed in, would play a greater role in shaping the political character of India. There was also no feeling of remorse over the events in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 — a sentiment that Advani had aired even from his prison cell.<sup>1</sup> He also made it clear that the BJP's motives were not just restricted to the question of seizing political power and governing the country. Rather, that the BJP would continue to have a dominant position in the Indian political spectrum and dictate the agenda for the country. On that day, there were few, even among journalists critical of the BJP, who disputed Advani's assertion. It was obvious that the BJP's success could no longer be viewed as the proverbial flash in the pan.

Advani also talked in detail about Ram and the place the mythical hero would have in the India of BJP's vision. There was not even a hint of hesitation on Advani's part when he said that Ram had to be accepted by every person wishing to live in India. Opposition to the god-king — meaning people who articulated views contrary to the BJP's demand about what should be done in Ayodhya now — would mean being kept out of the national mainstream. Throughout Advani's opening remarks, it was clear that he believed in the cultural supremacy of the majority Hindus and this cultural tradition would provide the basis for the Indian political system when the BJP came to have a greater political say in the country. The Hindu sense of tolerance was missing from all of Advani's assertions. Rather, his basic framework was

hegemonic and it was clear that, the BJP cared little for the views of people from the minority communities. In fact, it was also evident that even those Hindus who did not agree with the BJP's perspective would have to alter their thinking if they wished to play a significant role in India's future.

On that day, Advani's facade of a suave tolerant politician with whom persons from different political persuasions could argue, was gone. He represented every bit a bigoted leader who would not hesitate to grind to dust those who did not agree with the views of his party. What happened to the Babri Masjid could soon happen to every institution and individual that came in the way of the BJP's rise to a greater position of political pre-eminence. Every sentence that Advani uttered that day contained a threat directed towards the critics of the Hindutva idea, and the spectre for them ahead was chilling. Ram was equated with nationalism and the attitude of each person towards the god-king and the Ayodhya dispute, would be the determining factor for the future of the individual. Though he did not use the same words, Advani meant what one of his party colleagues, B.P. Singhal, a retired senior officer of the Indian Police Service (he joined the BJP after retirement) said some weeks later: "Enough is enough. It is now time that the country learns the truth."<sup>2</sup>

It has taken the advocates of the Hindutva idea sixty-eight years to come to a stage where they can brazenly say that they have a monopoly on the historical, social and cultural interpretation of India. Truth, according to Singhal, Advani and others wedded to the Hindutva idea, is only one — and that is the version being propagated by them. A careful perusal of the writings and speeches of the leaders of the VHP, BJP and the parent body, the RSS, makes it clear that they have a vision of a strictly structured society where dissent of any kind would not be tolerated the moment it went beyond the parameters defined by them. True, there will be different streams within the framework of the Hindutva idea, but anything outside it will be anathema. And the central issue in this is Ram, and the views on the Ayodhya agitation.



In fact, Ram has been the central theme of the advocates of the Hindutva idea from the time of its inception. When the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was formed in Nagpur, central India, in 1925, its founder Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a medical doctor by profession, chose the day of Vijay Dashami — celebrated by Hindus as the day when Ram triumphed over Ravan — to announce the formation of the RSS. The organisation, which initially comprised men drawn from a Brahmin locality of the town, organised an *akhara* once a week and political classes for the recruits twice a week, did not have a name in its formative years. One of its first public actions was to manage the huge crowds thronging a temple in Ramtek, a nearby village, on the occasion of *Ram Navami*, celebrated by Hindus as the day when Ram was born. Even today, rituals commemorating various stages in Ram's life have the pride of place in the RSS's schedule of religious festivals.

An account says: "Dasara is celebrated with more pomp and on a larger scale than any other festival. All *shakhas* in a geographic division of the RSS combine to perform the rituals. Prior to the formal function, the RSS band will march through the city followed by uniformed participants. The public is invited to the ceremony. A well known person from the area, often with no RSS affiliation, presides over the function. The *swayamsevaks* en masse will offer *pranam* to this person. He and a *pracharak* begin the festivities by worshipping a set of weapons traditionally associated with Shivaji. One offers puja by applying *sindur* (vermilion) and flowers to the weapons. The RSS bands play martial music, and the assembled *swayamsevaks* sing patriotic songs. En masse, the *swayamsevaks* demonstrate their skills with the lathi, sword, and various exercises".<sup>3</sup> The Dussehra celebrations are of particular importance in Nagpur even now, for the *sarsanghchalak* — the chief executive of the RSS — delivers a public speech that serves as the socio-political guide to every member of the sangh parivar throughout the year.

The political backdrop in India during the 1920s has to be borne in mind while analysing the reasons leading to the formation of the RSS and its eventual rise in the last decade as a propelling force behind the Hindutva idea. The third decade of the twentieth century in India was marked by a worsening of relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims. The withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement in 1922 by Mahatma Gandhi and the protracted imbroglio over the Khilafat movement gave an impetus to Hindu revivalism. As tension between the Hindus and Muslims increased, the dormant Hindu Mahasabha, which was formed in 1915 and had spearheaded the anti-cow slaughter agitation, was given a fresh lease of life. The Khilafat movement gave the Hindu revivalist a chance to contend that the Muslims in India had pan-Islamic aims and this had to be countered by the Hindus.

Several new organisations were floated in India during the early 1920s and this process culminated in a meeting of national Hindu leaders at Varanasi in August 1923. Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, whose rivalry with Pandit Motilal Nehru within the Congress was well established by this time, emerged as a leading leader of the Hindu revivalists in the United Provinces and stated that the prime reason for convening the Varanasi session was to prepare a strategy to "arrest the deterioration and decline of the Hindus, and to effect the improvement of the Hindus as a community."<sup>4</sup> Malviya was clear that if "Hindus made themselves strong, the rowdy section among the Mohammedans could not safely rob and dishonour Hindus."<sup>5</sup> The Varanasi session concluded with the call on Hindus to close their ranks, allow lower-caste Hindus entry into temples, and to adopt the *kshatriya* model of integrating militancy, vigour, and assertiveness in their daily life. But there were problems for the revivalists as, for the orthodox sections of Hindu theologians, the call for the dilution of the caste order was difficult to accept. The problem of disunity in Hindu society has continued to haunt all proponents of Hindu revivalism and, as the trend suggests, is unlikely to relent in the

near future. Nonetheless, the new forces slowly started gaining ascendancy and in time, religious leaders and revivalists came to a compromise, which in practical terms meant that both viewpoints could be articulated without any change in status quo.

In Nagpur also, the Hindu revivalists were looking for an opportunity to start an alternate political path towards self-realisation other than the one being pursued by Mahatma Gandhi. This came in 1923, when the local administration refused permission to Hindus to take out a procession on October 30 to honour a local Hindu deity. A call to disobey the order was issued and the response was satisfactory for the leaders of the procession, who promptly decided to found the Nagpur Hindu Sabha. Hedgewar, though active in the programmes of the Congress, was drawn to the new organisation and its leaders as he was beginning to get restive with the methods of Mahatma Gandhi. Riots broke out in Nagpur in 1924 and the Nagpur Hindu Sabha took the lead in giving a call to economically boycott the Muslims. This was also the time that Hedgewar was greatly influenced by a handwritten manuscript of the book *Hindutva*, written by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a militant Hindu nationalist, in 1922 while he was incarcerated in Ratnagiri jail in central India.

Savarkar's book, and the views expounded in it, was to become the central theme of Hedgewar's emerging ideological framework. In his thesis, Savarkar put forth the view that the Hindus were a nation and that they were the indigenous people of the subcontinent. The obvious regional, linguistic, social and sectorial differences did not prevent them from forming a single national group. Savarkar's thesis was in contradiction to the commonly accepted viewpoint — even by the British — of considering India as a geographical entity. The Hindu militant contended that India was a national entity in which the Hindus formed the core, while the others were settlers who had forced their way into India and had little place in the nation unless they accepted the corner-stone of nationhood. If Hedgewar had so far

lacked an intellectual basis for a reason to ~~part ways with the~~ Congress, Savarkar's book provided him with one. By the time the riots in Nagpur ended in 1924, Hedgewar was certain that the Hindus in India had to be given a new impetus, and this had to be done by psychological means. He took the call of the Varanasi session to heart, and worked towards the *kshatriya* model. Finally on the day of Dussehra, 1925 he founded the RSS whose first programmes were physical training sessions and political education classes. In years to come, these two aspects, besides that of managing the organisation, would become the distinctive feature of the RSS. Indeed, the three — physical training, intellectual coaching and organisational management still remain the main concern of the RSS leadership, and they have different cells managing these affairs.

One important reason for Hedgewar steering clear of the existing Hindu organisations in Nagpur and establishing a new one, was because he thought that the basic problem with Upper-caste Hindus was that they themselves were not willing to physically limit the Muslims in times of confrontation. They would instead look towards the lower castes. Hedgewar wanted the Upper-caste Hindus also to inculcate physical skills and since this was not ingrained in the philosophy of the existing organisations, he opted to pursue the RSS. From the beginning, Hedgewar was steadfast in his attempt to train a core group of young volunteers in the traditional martial arts. A uniform — white shirt, khaki shorts and black cap — was given to the volunteers. It was the same uniform as used for the volunteer force trained by Hedgewar during the Nagpur session of the Congress in 1920. In the formative years of the RSS, the first real chance of exhibiting its commitment towards protecting Hindus from Muslims came in the Nagpur riots of 1927. Volunteers of the RSS were divided into sixteen units and they were at the forefront in the riots. By this time, the *swayamsevak*s had been trained in the use of traditional arms like the lathi, sword, javelin and the dagger — weapons that could be used against street-smart adversaries, but not against the might of the British empire. The

choice of weapons and the fact that Hedgewar aimed at attracting youngsters from High-caste Hindu families as recruits, makes it clear that the RSS was fashioned to counter the growing militancy among the supporters of the Muslim League, and not to play a meaningful role in the fight against the Imperial power. The role played by the RSS in the Nagpur riots was recognised not just locally, but also among Hindu revivalists in the rest of the country. When the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha scheduled their national session at Bombay in December 1927, Hedgewar was asked to send RSS members dressed in the organisation's uniform. This interaction apart, the RSS did not adopt a firm political and activist posture, leading some of Hedgewar's associates to the organisation. The December 1929 session of the Congress in Lahore gave the call for *Purna Swaraj* (total independence) and in early 1930, Mahatma Gandhi embarked on his Dandi March. This was followed by leaders of the national movement giving the call for the Civil Disobedience Movement that year. Except for Hedgewar personally participating in the movement and being incarcerated briefly in 1931, the RSS stayed aloof from the Independence movement.

However, the RSS continued to grow and started expanding in places beyond Maharashtra. At the same time, the Congress also lost some of its activists to the RSS. Besides, Congress leaders worried that the growing proximity of its members with the Hindu Mahasabha, which was emerging as a counter to the Muslim League, was threatening the pivotal position of the Congress in the country. The Congress leadership asked one of its senior members, Jamnalal Bajaj, to seek clarifications from Hedgewar regarding the character of the RSS, but even this interaction failed to allay the fears of the Congress leaders. In June 1934, it resolved formally that no member of the Congress could participate or join either the Hindu Mahasabha, the Muslim League or the RSS.<sup>6</sup> However, this did not hinder the growth of the RSS and, instead, helped it to cement its ties with the Hindu Mahasabha for the time being. Contacts had been established between these two organisations from

the early years of the 1930s. In 1931, G.D. Savarkar (alias Baburao), the elder brother of the still jailed V.D. Savarkar, who had established the Tarun Hindu Sabha — meant to act like a youth wing of the Hindu Mahasabha — merged his organisation with the RSS and, in the same year, Bhai Parmanand, an Arya Samaj leader of Punjab, invited Hedgewar to attend the All India Young Men's Hindu Association meeting at Karachi.

Hedgewar was quick to seize the opportunity and launched the RSS in Sind, and subsequently in Punjab and the United Provinces. Baburao Savarkar also utilised his network of contacts among Hindu Mahasabha activists in the United Provinces and this helped greatly because of the fiery image of the Savarkar family. By this time, the Hindu Mahasabha had already adopted a resolution at its Delhi session in 1932, in which the RSS was commended for its activities. Even though there were some differences with the RSS primarily over Hedgewar's insistence in steering clear of conventional politics, the Hindu Mahasabha came to regard the RSS as a kind of front organisation, among the youth. The RSS secured the ultimate stamp of respectability among the Hindu revivalists in 1937, when V.D. Savarkar, after his release from jail, attended RSS *shakhas* and addressed gatherings. Later, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, another stalwart of the Hindu Mahasabha, praised the RSS and even likened it to a "silver lining in the cloudy sky of India."<sup>7</sup>

By this time the structure of the RSS had been evolved by Hedgewar with care. The RSS volunteers had been given a slogan in March 1928 and this intensified "their commitment through a romantic aura that was reminiscent of revolutionary-terrorist traditions."<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Hedgewar's speech at the first oath taking ceremony "once again used the symbolism of Ram, for its leitmotif was the famous passage in Tulsidas: 'Life itself can be sacrificed, but plighted word cannot be betrayed.' "<sup>9</sup> After the volunteers had been given a slogan, the need arose to give an institutional character to the RSS. Senior RSS leaders met at Nagpur in November 1929 and agreed that the basic philosophy

of the organisation's institutional structure would be the concept of "follow a single leader."<sup>10</sup> A supreme director called the *sarsanghchalak* would dictate the policies of the organisation and Hedgewar was nominated for the post. It is clear that right from its inception, the RSS abhorred internal democracy and this, in later years, was to be extended to the various front organisations of the RSS, including its political wing — the Jana Sangh first, and then the BJP — where internal democracy exists only on paper and only rarely in practice. (There have been divisions in the BJP of late, but this is largely owing to the party making a transition from a closely knit cadre-based organisation to that of a mass organisation). In time, Hedgewar evolved a pyramidal structure — followed by the RSS till date — which resembles the institutional character of all cadre-based parties where subservience to the immediate leader is the order of the day. At the bottom of the ladder is the *shakha*, which consists of a designated number of *swayamsevaks* who meet every morning for physical exercises and exchange of ideas on contemporary developments. (This activity is suspended whenever a ban has been enforced on the organisation). The *shakha* has leaders of smaller sub-groups, called *gatanayak*, and organisers, called *karyavah*. The *shakha*, which exists at the village or at the colony level, reports to the higher committee at the level of the *mandal* or the neighbourhood which, in turn, is controlled by the city unit. District, division, state, and zone are the other levels of the organisation's units and the last unit is answerable to the central office-bearers and other officials. The headquarters of the RSS is in Nagpur and there the *sarsanghchalak* is aided by the general secretary, who is in charge of the day-to-day management of the programmes. There is also an office secretary who functions as the main administrative pivot, but seldom has any say in policy formulation. A crucial role is performed by the five *pramukhs* in charge of the important activities of the RSS. The *prachar pramukh* is responsible for recruiting and posting the *pracharaks* at the level of the cities to manage the affairs there. The *sharirik pramukh*

arranges physical training at the *shakhas*, and is in charge of organising periodic camps. The *bauddhik pramukh* plays the crucial role of deciding which books should be read by *swayam-sevaks*, which songs be sung at the *shakha* — in short, he functions as the in-house censor and educational adviser. The *nidhi pramukh* has the vital role of collecting and managing the organisation's funds, while the *vyavastha pramukh* is the coordinator of all activities.

## Evolution of Strategy

Even though the RSS leaders profited greatly by associating with the Hindu Mahasabha, they were also quick to foresee the limitations of such an alliance. The Hindu Mahasabha, because of its avowed anti-Muslim stance, had several impediments in its emergence as a significant all-India political force. The RSS leaders were clear from the beginning that its role was not primarily political. Rather, the view of the RSS leaders was that the organisation would act as a philosophical guide for various political forces by its activities like character-building and intellectual development. The first real difference between the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS came in 1938-39 when the Hindu Mahasabha launched the civil disobedience movement against the Nizam of Hyderabad and Hedgewar decided that the RSS — which had activists even in that area — would not participate in the movement, though some *swayamsevaks* participated in their personal capacity. By this time, Savarkar had been elevated as president of the Hindu Mahasabha and he visualised a political future for the organisation, while Hedgewar did not do so for the RSS. This difference of opinion naturally pulled the two organisations in opposite directions.

The RSS lost some of its activists in the pursuit of its policy of not entering politics, the most important of them being Nathuram Godse, who had joined the RSS in 1930 and had been one of the trusted allies of Hedgewar. Godse, who in 1948 assassinated



Mahatma Gandhi, left the organisation for two reasons: First, he became impatient with Hedgewar's insistence in not giving a political character to the RSS; and second, because of his great admiration for Savarkar. But even though Godse left the RSS, he continued to be intellectually committed to the RSS view. (Even now the extent of RSS involvement in the assassination is speculative for senior RSS leaders are still secretive about the episode). But at the time the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS formally parted ways, there were little differences over policy matters. The disagreement was on the tactical path. While the Mahasabha felt that it was best suited to be projected as the vehicle to deliver a Hindu *Rashtra* to India, the RSS leadership had doubts and had other plans.

Hedgewar died after a protracted illness in June 1940 and a fortnight later it was announced that the deceased *sarsanghchalak* had nominated Golwalkar as the next chief of the RSS. This announcement was fiercely contested by many senior RSS leaders since Golwalkar had been a relatively new entrant in the RSS fraternity and others felt that the nomination had been contrived by Golwalkar and Ghatate, one of his close associates — the two of them had spent the maximum time with Hedgewar before his death. There were other names in the fray also. Some had expected Savarkar to be nominated for the post, while others felt that Appaji Joshi, an ally of Hedgewar from the formative years of the RSS would be elevated. One of the reasons why there was resentment at Golwalkar's nomination, was his inexperience in the RSS since he had only recently been promoted in the hierarchy, and the fact that he had no revolutionary or political background. His family background also went against him as, unlike Hedgewar, he came from a relatively prosperous family. He studied science, remained apolitical and during his late adolescence period turned towards religion and spiritualism. Golwalkar completed his masters in science from Benaras Hindu University and took up a faculty position when he came in contact with some RSS activists. In 1931, Hedgewar met him during one of his visits to the university and there is

an account of his being "immediately attracted to the ascetic twenty-five-year old teacher."<sup>11</sup> This meeting came at a time when Golwalkar's parents wanted him to return to Nagpur and take charge of the household.

In Nagpur, Golwalkar took a course in law and later started practising in the local courts. He was also drawn into the RSS by Hedgewar when he made Golwalkar the secretary of the main *shakha* in Nagpur. But, leadership qualities did not come naturally to Golwalkar. He soon went off to Bengal after abandoning his legal practice in 1936 to spend some time with Swami Akhandanand, a religious preacher who had been a colleague of Swami Vivekananda. He returned a year after the death of his guru and Hedgewar once again persuaded Golwalkar to take an active interest in the RSS by arguing with him that he could continue with his aim of spreading religion through the RSS. Golwalkar joined the RSS as a whole-time volunteer and that was the start of his phenomenal growth in the organisation in the next three years. He was given charge of the All India Officers Training Camp for three years from 1937, and his proximity to Hedgewar led to his appointment as the general secretary in 1939. In the meanwhile, Golwalkar wrote the first ever ideological treatise of the RSS: 'We, or Our Nationhood Defined.' By the time Hedgewar died in 1940, the stage had been set for Golwalkar to take charge of the RSS and give it a new thrust, notwithstanding the resistance to his leadership. However, the rigid character of the RSS came in handy for Golwalkar, and all opposition to him slowly subsided as the RSS forged ahead in the 1940s.

In the initial years under Golwalkar, the RSS lowered its profile, officially severed its links with the Hindu Mahasabha though personal contacts remained, suspended its military apparatus, stayed aloof from anti-British agitations, and during World War II, made no effort to enlist Hindus into the British army. Golwalkar, during this period concentrated more on evolving the ideology of the organisation and disseminating it

within the ranks of the *swayamsevaks*. Under Golwalkar, the basic ideological foundations, honed by Savarkar in his book *Hindutva* and later practised by Hedgewar, were given a sharper edge. One of the major theoretical departures made by Golwalkar from the position of Savarkar was to make a distinction between 'territorial nationalism' and 'cultural nationalism'. The major difference between Savarkar's book and Golwalkar's writings is that while the former laid greater emphasis on territorial nationalism, the latter was clear that cultural nationalism centred around Hindu consciousness, was of greater importance. Golwalkar and all successive writers from the RSS school of intellectual training have identified two types of enemy forces that could come in the way of Hindu hegemony: Muslims and Christians who have a different 'cultural' background; and the 'westernised elite' who has been fed on the 'modern myths' of socialism, capitalism and other 'isms'. (This explains the virulence of contemporary RSS leaders towards people with Marxist or other radical leanings.) Golwalkar argued his case against Muslims thus : "They look to some foreign lands as their holy places. They call themselves 'Sheikhs' and 'Syeds'. Sheikhs and Syeds are certain clans in Arabia. How then did these people come to think that they are their descendants? That is because they have cut off all their ancestral national moorings of this land and mentally merged themselves with the aggressors. They still think that they have come here only to conquer and establish their kingdoms."<sup>12</sup>

Earlier in the same book, Golwalkar is more assertive: "The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, and must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation i.e., they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its age-old traditions, but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead; in one word, they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the

Hindu nation claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizen's rights."<sup>13</sup> (On January 11, 1993 the BJP leader L.K. Advani had either browsed through Golwalkar's book, or remembered it clearly from his years at various RSS training camps, to be able to produce it virtually verbatim in a modern context!) Golwalkar also dwelt on the major international political development of that period — that of Hitler's decision to purge Germany of Jews. In open adulation of the Nazi programme, the RSS leader wrote: "German national pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by purging the country of the Semitic races — the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the roots, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by."<sup>14</sup> The present-day advocates of Hindutva have never repudiated the contentions of Golwalkar. On the contrary, his *Bunch of Thoughts*, a collection of his essays including 'We, or Our Nationhood Defined', has the pride of place in the collections of every votary of the Hindutva idea.

While Golwalkar perfected the ideological basis of the RSS in the 1940s which would stay unchallenged for several decades to come, the organisation scrupulously stayed away from all anti-British activity. The Civil Disobedience movement of 1940-41, the Quit India struggle, the Azad Hind Fauj, the uprisings against the INA trials and the Bombay Naval Mutiny — all meant little to the RSS. Yet the RSS grew phenomenally during this period. The number of *shakhas* doubled between 1940 and 1942 and there is a British estimate of 1944 which states that 76,000 men participated in the *shakhas* every day. That ideological training was one of the most important activities of the RSS can be gauged from the large number (10,000) of *swayamsevak*s who participated in the Officers Training Camps in 1945. By this time, close to half the number of *swayamsevak*s were from the United

Provinces and the rest were mainly drawn from modern Maharashtra and Punjab. However, like before, the leadership continued to be predominantly Maharashtrian and Brahmin. Between 1945 and 1948 the membership of the RSS grew manifold in parts of the subcontinent now in Pakistan, and this was a direct fallout of the growing communalisation of Indian society. However, the 'crowning glory', as even now several RSS leaders say in private conversations, came in August 1946 in Calcutta when a devastating communal riot broke out in the city following Mohammed Ali Jinnah's call for Direct Action on August 16.

### **The Surge Forward**

The RSS registered a tremendous growth in the turbulent 1940s, mainly at the expense of the Congress as activists of the party left it to join the RSS as a result of the unchecked rise of the Muslim League. For the British government, the RSS did not pose any threat as it did not participate in any programmes of the nationalists. An official Home Ministry assessment of the RSS opined that "it would be difficult to argue that the RSS constitutes an immediate menace to law and order."<sup>15</sup> The Bombay Home Department also had nothing negative to say about the RSS when it prepared the report on the August 1942 violent incidents during the Quit India movement. The report said that the RSS had "scrupulously kept itself within the law, and in particular has refrained from taking part in disturbances that broke out in August 1942."<sup>16</sup> By the time World War II came to an end, the core membership of the RSS had shifted from Maharashtra to the Hindi-speaking provinces and the bulk of the people who joined the organisation came from the trading community — a class which has since continued to remain traditional supporters of the Hindutva idea. These people, predominantly religion-oriented, were drawn to the RSS because of the consistent use of religious symbolism that sought to "justify social solidarity". By the time India was partitioned in 1947,

the RSS had emerged as a significant force in Punjab, on both sides of the newly created border, and was prepared for the crucial role it performed during the riots which followed. This would earn them great goodwill and be a long term asset for the image of the RSS and all its future front organisations. Such success, however, did not come the way of the RSS in Bengal, which was also partitioned. An explanation offered is that in Bengal the RSS "neither attracted support from prominent Hindu leaders, nor devoted much effort to organising Hindus."<sup>17</sup>

The RSS, after its role during the Calcutta riots of 1946, sensed that its time had come the moment Lord Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy, declared on June 3, 1947, that the colonial rulers had decided to partition the subcontinent on communal lines, and that the imperial rule would come to an end on August 15 that year. The announcement, made in the belief that it would not have serious law and order repercussions, belied the hopes of both the Viceroy and the Congress leaders. Migrations of Muslims began from the Indian side of the border, and there was a similar pattern in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab, which now fell on the Pakistani side of the border. There were migrations to and from East Pakistan also. Communal violence became common in the months after Mountbatten's announcement, and even as people migrated with their families after either hastily selling off their property or just abandoning it, neither the British government nor the nascent Indian state in the weeks after Independence could intervene in any productive manner. The population transfer was far from smooth and communal violence peaked in September 1947. Thousands of Hindu and Sikh families started fleeing from Pakistan and the same was the case of Muslims in India. There was open animosity between the two communities, and those Muslims who chose to stay back in India were subject to humiliations and social trials. Similar was the case of the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. Among the Hindus in India, there was a fear psychosis against Muslims and this was

both aided and used by the RSS to give further fillip to its growth.

The RSS had finally managed to get a chance to address its target audience: Hindus who were already in an agitated state of mind and nurtured hatred against the Muslims. With the social and political condition anarchic in India, the RSS "earned enormous goodwill for itself by assisting Hindu refugees in their flight to India and by providing aid in their readjustment to life in a new country."<sup>18</sup> The RSS organised squads from the Indian side of the border to bring batches of refugees from the other side. In the troubled states of Punjab and Sindh, there was open collusion between Congress leaders and the RSS as Congress activists sought the help of the RSS in protecting the Hindus. The martial training of the *swayamsevaks* came in handy as they were assigned to guard the homes of Hindus from Muslim attackers. Weapons were collected and hand grenades manufactured. The RSS activists were also at the forefront of the communal riots and instrumental in retaliatory attacks on Muslims who had opted to stay back in India. The RSS activists preached in the camps that the Muslims who had stayed back had to be driven to Pakistan just as the Hindu and Sikh refugees were made to flee from Pakistan. This was contrary to the pleas of the Congress leaders who were opposed to a theocratic India, and instead had pledged their commitment to a secular country where the state would not be partisan towards any particular religion.

The new government could not ignore the pivotal position of the RSS. It was managing four major relief camps in Delhi, where the majority of refugees were camped. In September, when communal violence was at its peak in India, the RSS was requested for help to maintain law and order in the capital by the regional security officers. The regional military commander of the capital met Golwalkar personally to seek his help. Mahatma Gandhi also visited a *shakha* in which he pleaded with Golwalkar that maintenance of law and order was the job of the government, and it should be left free to handle it in the manner it deemed

fit. But the RSS chief stated that all RSS action was purely defensive and that he could not vouch for the actions of each *swayamsevak* if they were reported to have participated in offensive action. The government also realised the growing clout of the RSS and the Home Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, requested the intervention of Golwalkar in persuading the Maharaja of Kashmir to agree to accede to India. Golwalkar met the Maharaja and when the Indian troops were allowed to enter the state, the Indian army armed the activists of the RSS as also the members of the National Conference headed by Sheikh Abdullah.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of 1947, the RSS leadership realised the growth it had registered in the months after the decision to partition the sub-continent. The leadership decided to make a show of its strength and scheduled a rally in Delhi on December 10, 1947. The rally was a success and it was attended by "several Hindu princes, prominent businessmen, and an array of leaders from various Hindu organisations."<sup>20</sup> The rally underscored the stranglehold that the RSS had come to acquire on a sizable section of the Hindus and the class of people who turned out for the rally was indicative of the main support base of the RSS and its frontal organisations in the years to come.

The year ended with several senior political leaders expressing fears of the RSS emerging as an independent political force. The apprehensions of these leaders, mainly from the Congress, were based on several factors: From a strength of around one million at the time when World War II ended, the number of *swayamsevaks* had swelled to more than six million by the end of 1947; moreover, the thousands of refugees from Punjab and Sindh after staying in the relief camps were starting to settle in several towns and cities in north India, carrying with them tales of valour and bravery of the RSS activists. In the places where the refugees were beginning to settle down, they were establishing the RSS and spreading hatred against the Muslims. However, Golwalkar continued to resist pressure from within the ranks of *swayamsevaks* who wanted the RSS playing an active



role in politics, as he had a greater plan. This was finally unfolded in 1948 when, at a speech in Lucknow on January 6, Vallabhbhai Patel talked in glowing terms of the RSS activists and suggested to his party men that they should try to win over the RSS "with love". This was preceded by a meeting of state home ministers, convened by Patel in November 1947, where after taking stock of the communal situation in the country, it was decided that the activities of the RSS should not be curbed even though there were open allegations against the organisation saying that it was fomenting riots. There was also a mounting demand from within the Congress, to take action against the RSS. However, the insistence of Golwalkar that the RSS should steer clear of partisan politics was a part of his old belief that led to the parting of ways between the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS in the early years of the 1940s. It was also indicative of his view that the Congress was the best vehicle for the ideas of the RSS and this became clear in subsequent months.

However, the plans of Golwalkar in ensuring a greater social role for the RSS, received a serious setback in January 1948. The month started with the outbreak of communal riots in Delhi. Horrified at the intensity, Mahatma Gandhi started a fast in the capital on January 12 and ended it six days later only after Hindu and Sikh leaders, including the regional leader of the RSS, agreed to his demand to end violence. But, the hatred that the RSS had preached since its inception through books, speeches and in private gatherings soon backfired on the organisation as Nathuram Vinayak Godse, a former member of the RSS, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi on Friday, January 30, 1948 in Delhi shortly after his evening prayers. His motive was explained by Gopal Godse, his brother who had been aware of the plan: "We were simply trying to rid the nation of someone who had done and was doing great harm to it. He had consistently insulted the Hindu nation and had weakened it by his doctrine of 'ahimsa'. On his many fasts, he always attached all sort of pro-Muslim conditions. He never did anything about Muslim fanatics. We

wanted to show Indians that there were Indians who would not suffer humiliation that there were still men left among the Hindus of the country".<sup>21</sup>

Golwalkar promptly sent telegrams to Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, expressing shock at the assassination. But that did not assuage Indians who loved Gandhi. It was common knowledge that Godse had been indoctrinated by the RSS to believe that Hindus were superior to the Muslims, and that the Congress was instrumental in the 'appeasement' of Muslims. There were also few takers that the Hindu Mahasabha — Godse was its member — and the RSS had actually severed links with each other and had not jointly planned the assassination. Attacks followed on RSS workers and offices in several parts of the country and in Maharashtra, the anger against the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was directed against Brahmins who were singled out for attacks Godse was a Brahmin as were the majority of the RSS leadership. The Government of India in spite of having people, like Patel, sympathetic to the RSS could not help the RSS and on February 4, 1948, the organisation was banned, all its activities were declared illegal and leaders of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha were placed under arrest. Golwalkar, before his arrest, asked his colleagues to suspend all activity. Meanwhile, the government arrested an estimated 20,000 *swayamsevak*s from various parts of the country. Offices were raided, records seized, funds frozen, and property and other equipment were impounded. Golwalkar, who a few weeks ago had been close to fulfilling his dream of dictating the policies of the Congress and the government from the back seat, was busy chalking out new strategies in his prison cell.

For the next few months, the main aim of the RSS was in getting the ban on its activities lifted, and prove that it was not involved in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The setback was obvious to all. The RSS which had been able to pitchfork itself into a pivotal position in Indian society by the end of 1947, suddenly found itself flung on the periphery. It would have to

wait for another four decades before the RSS regained centre stage. But to return to the pivotal position, it had to dramatically alter its strategy. But, before that, it had to flounder for more than 30 years before its new approach started taking shape in the early 1980s.

## **Regaining Lost Ground**

By 1980, the political scenario in India had undergone a sea change since the early years after Independence. The nation had just seen the end of the first non-Congress government formed after Indira Gandhi lifted internal Emergency, and announced elections in early 1977. But, the conglomeration of various non-Congress parties could not hold together for long and internal differences led to the parting of ways. The Janata Party, as the new party was called after the merger of the anti-Congress parties, split, and Indira Gandhi assured support to a minority faction and later after Charan Singh assumed office as Prime Minister, withdrew the support and precipitated general elections. In the ensuing polls, Indira Gandhi was voted into office again. The leaders of the splinter groups of the Janata Party were bewildered over their next move. The elections were won by Indira Gandhi and her main slogan was "vote for those who can run a government" an obvious strategy to highlight the bickering within the Janata Party and its impact on the smooth functioning of the government. In the 1980 elections, it was clear that anti-Congressism was still a dominant factor in Indian politics. The Janata Party had been voted to power in 1977 because the electorate was dissatisfied with the authoritarian methods witnessed during Emergency, and in 1980, it returned Indira Gandhi because they wanted a stable government. They also felt that neither of the two Janata groups would be able to provide political stability to the country. Both in 1977 and 1980, the electoral results had followed the pattern of earlier elections, where the Congress stood out as a single pole in the bipolar political

spectrum and other parties formed the other pole. The Congress stood to gain if the other parties failed to strike out alliances and electoral adjustments, and suffered if such an alliance came about. While this had been first visible in 1967, the grand alliance of 1977 had humiliated Indira Gandhi to such an extent, that even she was unable to retain her parliamentary seat.

The seventies had also been a decade of transition for the RSS. Golwalkar had died in 1973 and he was succeeded by Balasaheb Deoras who advocated a more active role for the RSS, and the *swayamsevaks* than his predecessor. The RSS had faced the second crackdown in its history during Emergency when the organisation was banned by Indira Gandhi for the active role played by its members in the anti-Congress agitation spearheaded by Jai Prakash Narain. After Emergency, when the move to forge a grand alliance against Indira Gandhi was initiated by JP, the RSS gave the nod to the Jana Sangh leaders to merge the party with the others to form the Janata Party. However, the links of the former Jana Sangh leaders with the RSS became a contentious issue and one of the factors that led to the split in the Janata Party was the question of 'dual membership' of the former Jana Sangh leaders. Critics demanded that the Jana Sangh leaders resign from the RSS, but they did not comply. However, the RSS did not precipitate the split in the Janata Party and it even allowed the former Jana Sangh members to stay away from the newly formed *samanyavaya samitis* or coordination committees. These committees had been formed by Deoras after the Emergency was lifted to ensure better coordination between the front organisations of the RSS, and with the parent body. The RSS was content that with the fact that two of its former *swayamsevaks* were holding the crucial portfolios of External Affairs and Information and Broadcasting, in the Janata Party government another was holding a junior charge in the Finance Ministry and the fact that former *swayamsevaks* were also playing a decisive role in shaping the policies of the Janata Party governments in several states. At that time there was little that the RSS could

complain about because this was the closest it had come to power. It mattered little to the RSS leadership that its role was not officially recognised.

But, the situation changed dramatically after the return of Indira Gandhi to power and the resulting disarray in the Janata Party. The RSS, after embarking on a major expansion programme among the tribals and the lower caste Hindus, chose to steer clear of political controversy throughout the debate within the Janata Party, on the question of dual membership. The collapse of the Janata Party government also reinforced the belief of several RSS leaders that the organisation should not put all their eggs in one basket. Distance was thus maintained from the activities of the former Jana Sangh group, and this continued till the time these leaders did not return to the ideology of the RSS.

In 1980, for the former members of the Jana Sangh it was a matter of political survival. Indira Gandhi had meanwhile embarked on a process of consolidating her gains in the last general elections and the various constituents of the Janata Party were trying to pick threads anew from the debris of the collapsed experiment. The Jana Sangh group was also doing the same. This group of the Janata Party had been singled out for criticism because of the links with the RSS, and their refusal to sever ties with the RSS. It meant that the group could not afford to break their symbiotic relationship with the RSS, even after the collapse of the Janata experiment, as this would give fillip to the critics of the 'dual membership' argument. But the group was also in no position to abandon the principles and policies of Jai Prakash Narain who had died by then as it could be accused of being an opportunistic group that merged in the Janata Party merely for coming to power. There was a clear dichotomy between the Jana Sangh legacy and the new association with the politics of JP. The RSS leadership watched this dilemma from the sidelines, and did not play an active role in the Jana Sangh group's attempt to evolve its future political strategy. Finally, the Jana Sangh group

decided to have a mix of both worlds a bit of the RSS ideology and several components of the JP legacy. The strategy of the Jana Sangh group unfolded in Delhi on April 6, 1980 with the formation of a new political party the Bharatiya Janata Party. There was a clear attempt to broad-base itself from the Jana Sangh of earlier years, and several politicians who had been members of other constituents of the Janata Party joined the new party. The plan of the new party, as it unfolded in the capital city, had no indications of a grand design that would pitchfork the party into a pivotal position in a decade. In 1980, the formation of the BJP was at best a defensive act of a group that was trying to fight political marginalisation and attract the attention of its parent body. But at the same time, the group was keen to project itself as a formation that had learnt lessons from the Janata experience. A fresh outlook was being explored after realising that there was little use of clinging to the beliefs of the Jana Sangh.

In the soul of the new party, the leaders of the BJP gave equal space to the two legacies that it was trying to incorporate within itself: Jai Prakash Narain and Jana Sangh. Thus at its first meeting, the party leaders noted with regret that JP's "dream was shattered" by the collapse of the Janata Party. They also attacked sharply the critics of the former Jana Sangh members of the united party for their links with the RSS. The resolution noted that "when the Janata Party was formed in 1977, no one objected to the ties of the former Jana Sangh members with the RSS," and added that this criticism was levelled only "when the leadership struggle intensified" within the party. The question of the new party's relationship with the RSS was spelt out categorically: "The party reiterates that it welcomes in its fold all members of any organisation that is engaged in the social and cultural upliftment of the nation and its people... and till the time these people believe in the policies of the BJP, their membership with such organisations shall not be considered violative of any party discipline".<sup>22</sup>

The new party listed five points as its main objectives and

they were indicative of the two legacies that the BJP was trying to cope with. The five points were: Nationalism and national integration; commitment to democracy; Gandhian socialism; value-based politics; and genuine secularism. Of the five points, the last was a clear continuation of the RSS approach on the issue of communalism. The first point listed was an attempt to find a meeting point between the RSS approach on the question of nationalism, and JP's approach on the issue. The other three points that were detailed in the resolution indicated that the BJP was striving hard to shed the sectarian image of the Jana Sangh and don the look of a liberal centrist party. On the question of nationalism and national integration, the newly formed party was playing with words when it declared that "India was one nation, such a nation where people from different religions, ideologies, languages, interests met...and there was no reason why the people could not coexist in peace and harmony".<sup>23</sup>

But, there were contradictions when the BJP talked about "genuine secularism" and detailed the perspective of the Congress on the issue as being instrumental in aiding the growth of communalism in the country. It said that "secularism did not only mean that there should be no intolerance among people from different religions".<sup>24</sup> The BJP argued on the contrary that genuine secularism meant that there should be "integration" between various religions and people professing them. However, nowhere in the resolution adopted in the first meeting did the BJP elaborate on the manner in which its beliefs could be implemented. However, the real departure from the value system of the Jana Sangh was the assertion that the new party was committed to Gandhian Socialism. This was a significant deviation from the concept of Integral Humanism as propounded by Deendayal Upadhyay, one of Jana Sangh's former presidents, found dead in mysterious circumstances in the late sixties while travelling in a train. Similar was the case regarding the BJP's principled commitment to democracy and value-based politics, both concepts popularised by JP during the agitation against the

authoritarian policies of Indira Gandhi.

It is clear that the spearheads of the new party were trying to emerge as the 'true successor' of the Janata Party and not allow other constituents of the Janata Party to claim that they were the political heirs of JP and his policies. The BJP was trying to project itself as the principal anti-Congress political force in India. In an attempt to broad-base itself from the Jana Sangh of earlier years, the word Janata was introduced in the name, several non-Jana Sangh politicians were nominated to the working committee the most significant of these appointments was that of former Congress(O) leader Sikandar Bakht, a Muslim. He functioned as a general secretary under Atal Behari Vajpayee, elected as the president of the new party. The attempt of the spearheads of the BJP to strike a balance between the twin legacies of the party was symbolically underscored in the choice of the flag of the new party. It was neither pure saffron like that of the Jana Sangh, nor completely green like that of the Janata Party. Instead, there was a mix of the two colours and the lamp symbol of the Jana Sangh was replaced by the lotus, a symbol that would have great power in years to come. It was evident that the BJP was trying to keep its connections with the RSS and use the *swayamsevak*s for building its cadre, even while trying to don a more liberal image. The RSS activists were being sought to be kept within the party fold, by the emphatic declaration on the question of dual membership. The liberal image was being projected by conscious articulation of acceptable 'secular' concepts like Gandhian Socialism and value-based politics. But, in the initial years of the party existence, this balancing act between two contrary value systems would come as an impediment to the party's growth. The BJP kept falling between the proverbial 'two stools,' and this became visible in its first year at Bombay in December 1980 during the party's first plenary session.

Ironically, the simmering differences within the rank and file of the former Jana Sangh members with the liberal facade of the party, started coming to the fore because the new party had



abandoned the rigid organisational structure of the Jana Sangh. The RSS, as seen earlier, believed in a command hierarchy and the guiding organisational management method is the Marxist concept of democratic centralism where there is democracy within a basic parameter and the leadership's decisions are rarely questioned. This style of functioning had been followed by the Jana Sangh, but was abandoned in favour of a more democratic framework by the BJP when it was formed. Jai Prakash Narain's organisational model was decentralised in character, and allowed greater opportunity to junior leaders to articulate their views. But, in December 1980, leaders of the BJP, who would have silently accepted the policies of the leadership in the rigid structure of the Jana Sangh, started raising questions regarding the new symbols that the BJP was trying to project. What bothered many delegates to the Bombay session was the use of the concept of Gandhian Socialism instead of the Integral Humanism of Deendayal Upadhyay. The word 'socialism' was found to be 'foreign' because of its links with a 'foreign ideology': Marxism. Delegates to the session felt that this would send wrong signals to the people of India. The concept of socialism was also ranged against the Jana Sangh's economic perspective, which believed in market economy. Critics of the image that the BJP leadership was trying to project, felt that if the party continued to publicise concepts like Gandhian Socialism and value-based politics, it would make increasingly difficult for the people to demarcate the BJP from the Congress. This fear was best articulated by the senior BJP leader Vijaya Raje Scindia one of the vice-president then who submitted a note during the working committee meeting, prior to the plenary session. Scindia objected to the policies of the BJP. Her contention was that the new programmes of the BJP were making it a virtual "photocopy" of the Congress and there was little of original appeal for the party. Scindia withdrew her note after the party leadership stated that even though the BJP was using the word socialism, it was being used in an Indian context. Vajpayee took

the cue from the discussion in the working committee and in his presidential address while inaugurating the plenary session "took pains to distinguish Gandhian Socialism from Marxism. He claimed that Gandhian Socialism rejected (a) the notion that all ideas are grounded in 'material conditions', (b) violence as an instrument of policy, and (c) the concentration of political and economic power".<sup>25</sup> But, Vajpayee's clarification did not remove the doubt in the minds of the delegates. Several other delegates objected to the use of the words. There were suggestions that the word socialism must be replaced by *Ram Rajya*. There was also a demand that the matter be discussed by the state units, before it was accepted as the official policy of the party. It was clear that there was no difference with the content of Gandhian Socialism, as mentioned in the policy statement, since it basically adhered to the centrist economic orientation, of the Jana Sangh. What was finding few takers was the choice of words. The rank and file of the former Jana Sangh members, were uncomfortable with the new phraseology that Vajpayee and his supporters within the party, were trying to popularise. However, it was evident that it was only a matter of time before the BJP would have to revert to the old symbols, and phraseology of the days of the Jana Sangh. This was apparent not from the speeches of the party leaders, but from a brief speech by one of the invited guests at the plenary session. M.C. Chagla, a noted jurist, who had been invited to the session was requested to address it. He made it clear that his basic agreement with the BJP was on its attitude towards the problem of minorities, and the related problem of communalism. In his speech, he agreed with the BJP's perspective on the issue, and declared that "after partition no minority in this country has the right to be called a political minority".<sup>26</sup> However, the BJP in 1980, did not realise the potential of support for its approach on the issue of communalism and therefore continued to project a Nehruvian facade. In 1980, the BJP unable to set the political agenda as it was able to do from the late 1980s. When the BJP was formed, it was still opposing

Indira Gandhi on her parameters. In the process, it ignored the pressure from within its ranks, and the likely support from newer social sections which had earlier stayed away from the Jana Sangh's sphere of influence.

## Stealthy Moves

Even as the former Jana Sangh leaders stumbled in their effort to give a definite direction to the fledgling new party, the RSS was quietly involved in spreading its base. Though none of the RSS leaders frowned upon the actions of the BJP, it was clear that the new party had little in it to make the RSS over enthusiastic about it.<sup>27</sup> This was apparent at the decision of the RSS leadership not to invite the BJP leaders for the meetings of the *samanyavaya samitis*. At the time of its formation, the BJP was not really considered to be a part of the RSS clan, which by now came to be increasingly referred as the 'sangh parivar.'

However, the RSS had grown significantly during the Janata Party's tenure. By the early 1980s, the number of *shakhas* had nearly doubled from the 1977 mark of 11,000. A report of the Union Home Ministry of 1981 estimated the number of regular RSS activists to be close to one million, and assessed the financial contribution from them and other sympathisers to more than 10 million rupees every year. A significant aspect of the RSS's growth in the period following Emergency, was the rapid stride being made by the RSS in the four southern states. It is also significant that two RSS affiliates the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, a student's organisation, and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, a trade union also registered significant growth (they nearly grew by one third of their existing strength) in the same period. By early 1980s the RSS had also turned its attention to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an organisation initiated by Golwalkar in 1964. This group but had so far concentrated on the north-east, where the main focus of the organisation was to prevent the conversion of people to Christianity. It had also been

active in running various missionary programmes. However, some of the activities of the VHP which had been stopped during the Emergency were revived once the Janata Party came to power. By the time Indira Gandhi returned to power, the VHP had considerably expanded its network and claimed to have nearly 3000 units spread over 437 of a total of 534 administrative districts in India. The organisation was being managed by 150 full time workers drawn from the RSS, and the organisation was also engaged in running hostels, orphanages, medical centers and publishing journals that constantly raised fears of Hindus being swamped by 'non-Hindu foreigners.' In early 1980s, the RSS was concentrating on the VHP, and was eager to see its emergence as a significant force.

By the end of 1980, the RSS leadership had every reason to feel pleased. The organisation had grown several folds in the past four years. Its affiliates were also poised for further growth. The question of dual membership that had rocked India had been settled, and a new political party had been formed that was committed to its ties with the RSS. But the most significant factor in favour of the RSS, was that the Union government was no longer hostile to it. Indira Gandhi, much chastened after the defeat of 1977, no longer considered the RSS to be an anathema, and instead realised the latent power of a vote bank comprising the majority Hindus. However, for the RSS the biggest handicap in late 1980, was the absence of an emotive issue that would give a new impetus to its programmes.

The RSS did not have to wait for long and in February 1981 a handy ladle came its way. Meenakshipuram, an obscure village in Tirunelveli district in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, shot into national and even international prominence as it came to symbolise the 'threat to Hinduism'. Out of the 185 families which lived in Meenakshipuram, 143 converted to Islam in February 1981. This incident led to a massive uproar which had echoes for several years. The 800 Hindus who converted to Islam were from the Low caste of untouchables and belonged to the Palla

sect of the Harijans. Meenakshipuram had seen caste tension between caste Hindus in the adjoining villages and the Harijans staying there. The Harijans who converted to Islam declared that they had taken this decision because of the rigidity in Hindu society and the fact that caste Hindus repressed them. The neo-converts to Islam were not only from the suppressed lower caste, but were also economically badly off. One-third of them were landless labourers and the others had marginal land holdings. One interesting detail about the Meenakshipuram conversions is that three Christian families who lived in the village, also embraced Islam. They had earlier converted to Christianity and were also from the same Palla sect of Harijans. The conversions in Meenakshipuram was cited by the VHP as an instance of "danger to Hinduism". Allegations were levelled that the conversions had been engineered by Islamic fundamentalists, who wished to slowly change the "demographic character"<sup>28</sup> of India. There were also allegations that the Gulf countries had channelled funds to organise this mass conversion, and that the Harijans of Meenakshipuram had been offered monetary benefits, in return for converting to Islam. While the conversions evoked considerable interest in India, it also gave the VHP a chance to face the bitter fact that it could not bring about Hindu solidarity, unless the fissures within Hindu society were cemented. This is the time that the VHP and the RSS leaders realised that it could not bring about Hindu consolidation, without drawing religious leaders into its fold.

An interesting aspect of the VHP so far had been its failure to rope in the Hindu clergy and other personalities of the institutionalised religion. The VHP leadership was quick to realise that it would be unable to forge an all-encompassing Hindu society, unless the religious leaders called for diluting the caste barriers. This could not be done unless the clergy was made a partner in the VHP. However, since the VHP was established as a Trust, it had no membership and the problem arose that the RSS leadership even while having the religious leaders in the

VHP fold did not wish to lose control of the organisation. However, the Meenakshipuram conversions had precipitated the need for the VHP to make inroads in the clergy. The tricky issue was resolved by the VHP leadership, by constituting a Kendriya Marg Darshak Mandal in March 1981, less than a month after the conversions. This decision of the VHP underlines the desperation within the VHP as a result of the Meenakshipuram episode. The Mandal, consisting of religious leaders from various Hindu sects, was given the specific mandate of advising the VHP leadership and its trustees on matters relating to "Hindu philosophical thought and code of conduct".<sup>29</sup> The Mandal was the VHP's link to the religious leaders and would assume great importance in the next few years. The religious leaders in the Mandal, further decided to broad-base their character and constituted yet another body in 1982. The new assembly was called the Dharam Sansad and from the beginning was projected as the supreme deliberative body to decide on issues pertaining to the interests of the Hindus. The Mandal would convene the Sansad to ratify its decisions and in the process, it sought to involve a large number of Hindu priests in the policies of the VHP. However, the VHP made it clear from the beginning, that while it would allow itself to be 'guided' by the Mandal and the Sansad, the decisions of the VHP would be taken by its office bearers alone.

While the VHP was organisationally gearing itself up for the protracted struggle to 'save Hinduism' following the Meenakshipuram conversions it was also engaged in preparing its theoretical case. A VHP publication argued that in "Bharat religious conversions pose a grave threat to the national security and integrity of the country...A large area of the motherland is now foreign to us because of the conversions of Hindus living in those places have been converted to alien faiths".<sup>30</sup> The consistent campaign, and the formation of the Marg Darshak Mandal and the subsequent attempt by some Hindu religious leaders in allaying the fears of the Lower castes, had some impact in

**Meenakshipuram.** In July 1981, some of the neo-converts to Islam had re-converted to Hinduism. But, the return of these families to the Hindu fold was not enough for the VHP, and by the end of 1982, the organisation had geared itself up sufficiently to be able to launch its most ambitious programme till that time. Sensing that the Meenakshipuram incident had taken place because of the rigidity in Hindu society, the VHP had got the mandate from the Marg Darshak Mandal to concentrate on elevating the lot of the Lower castes, tribals, and the rural poor. The argument put forward by the VHP was that this programme would prevent similar conversions in future. In January 1983, the VHP launched a campaign to collect five crore rupees to be spent on the deprived sections of Hindus. The campaign was successfully completed in nearly four months and re-conversions of Muslims and Christians became the priority area for the VHP. The VHP programme came at a time when Hindu sentiment was beginning to get visible in the backdrop of nascent Sikh terrorism in Punjab.

The new thrust of the VHP also coincided with the elections to the state assembly, in Jammu and Kashmir. This election saw Indira Gandhi unabashedly use the communal card to split the state into a Hindu Jammu and a Muslim Kashmir. The Jammu region was electorally swept by the Congress, while the Kashmir Valley was bagged by the National Conference led by Sheikh Abdullah's son, Farooq Abdullah. The BJP which contested several seats in the state, failed to win a single seat even in the traditional Jana Sangh pockets, and it gave rise to suspicions that the RSS cadre had shifted its loyalty to the Congress. In fact, throughout the early 1980s, the RSS found little to disagree with Indira Gandhi's approach on sensitive issues of the time. Similarly, Mrs Gandhi also found little to disagree with the RSS. She and her party did not find the RSS activities irksome as it was steering clear of party politics and beyond the formal association, its links with the BJP posed no threat to the government. The RSS and its main affiliate of that time the VHP were engaged in

raising Hindu consciousness, and this increased awareness helped Indira Gandhi in communally polarising the state of Jammu and Kashmir and in combating Sikh militancy in Punjab by getting the sanction of the Hindus in the state to take stern administrative measures in the state. Indira Gandhi also gave greater credibility to the VHP and its programmes, by turning the proverbial Nelson's eye to the association of Karan Singh, one of her confidants, with the VHP. Indeed, in the initial stages of the VHP activities in the early 1980s, there was little to distinguish between the VHP and another organisation called the Virat Hindu Sammelan, spearheaded by Karan Singh, a scion of the Kashmir princely family and a former Union Minister under Indira Gandhi.

The VHP followed its success in raising funds for working among the deprived sections of the Hindus, with another programme called the Ekatmata Yagna. The programme, launched with the aim of driving home the message of national integration, had the definite plan to strengthen Hindu solidarity. The campaign lasting for a month from November 16, 1983 envisaged processions carrying giant urns filled with water from the Ganga. There were public meetings and rallies in the towns through which the processions passed. There were three main marches and as many as 90 smaller marches which merged with one of the main marches. The month-long campaign had a tremendous impact on the people and the VHP claimed that 60 million people had participated in the Ekatmata Yagna. It also claimed that a total of 85,000 kms were traversed during the programme. During the marches, the VHP also sold the Ganga water in small bottles and an estimated one and a half million such bottles were sold, adding to the coffers of the VHP. The processions congregated in Nagpur, the central Indian city where the RSS headquarters are located, and each procession was accompanied by a portrait of 'Bharat Mata', the deity that the VHP claimed, symbolised 'holy motherland.' The deity was mounted on the map of the Indian subcontinent and it appealed



to the average Hindu mind which appreciated any talk of reclaiming Pakistan and Bangladesh.

By the time the Ekatmata Yagna came to an end in December 1983, the VHP had succeeded in pitchforking itself in the national limelight. From an organisation that was virtually unknown in several parts of the country in 1980 when Indira Gandhi returned to power, the VHP was slowly emerging as an organisation which had the right to articulate the "grievances of Hindus". Gandhi on her own part had no reason to oppose the VHP and its programmes, as it suited her politically. She in fact was a high profile participant in the VHP public meeting in the capital, when the procession reached Delhi. An added factor was the lack of interaction and cooperation between the VHP and any of her political adversaries, including the BJP. Though it did not have formal members because of its organisational nature there was a groundswell of support for the VHP. The VHP had grown considerably in a short span of time primarily by dwelling on the threat perceptions of Hindus, of being outnumbered by Muslims. However, there were also limitations in this campaign. The VHP leadership felt the need to take up another issue which had greater emotive appeal than a matter of conversion of a few hundred Harijans, in a remote village in Tamil Nadu. It was also important to locate an issue that could be sustained over time, and the nature of the imbroglio would have to be such as to defy a speedy settlement.

It is claimed that a few senior RSS leaders some of them were also active in the VHP visited Ayodhya in early 1984 when a meeting of the organisation was held in the state capital of Lucknow. Till that time, the RSS leadership had "vaguely" heard of the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. However, when they "saw the plight of Ram Lalla, tears came"<sup>31</sup> to the eyes of the RSS leaders and they vowed to build a magnificent temple for Ram. At that time, there was no dispute in Ayodhya between Hindus and Muslims, and the contesting parties were continuing their legal battle in the local Faizabad court. However, the RSS

and VHP leaders felt that they had been able to locate the "right issue" after they returned from Ayodhya. In a series of informal meetings in Delhi and Nagpur, it was decided that the VHP should first enlist the support of the religious leaders and then launch the agitation after the sanction was granted by the clergy. Preparations began, the Marg Darshak Mandal was sounded out, and it agreed to convene a Dharam Sansad. To broad-base the support base among various Hindu sects, the VHP also took up the issue of the shrines in Mathura and Varanasi.

It was argued that while Ram was the right image to be taken up at that time, because of the reverence to the legendary hero as an ideal human being, it was necessary to also agitate for the shrine in Varanasi as it would ensure the participation of the Shaivites in the agitation. After all the groundwork had been done by the leaders of the VHP, the Dharam Sansad met for two days in Delhi on April 7-8, 1984 at the government-owned Vigyan Bhavan, a conference venue that has hosted several conclaves of great importance including the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in 1983. The meeting, attended by nearly one thousand religious leaders from various sects of Hinduism, demanded that the three shrines in Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi be "restored" to the Hindus, as it was the "cause of great anguish"<sup>32</sup> to Hindu society. The meeting also announced the intention to form a new organisation to be called Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti, and stated that this body would spearhead the agitation for the "liberation of Ram's birthplace". Daudayal Khanna, a former Congress leader from the north Indian city of Moradabad, who later joined the VHP, was given the charge of coordinating the formation of the new organisation. The die was finally cast three months later in Ayodhya, when the religious leaders met with the VHP leadership and appointed Mahant Avidyanath, a Hindu Mahasabha leader from the east Uttar Pradesh city of Gorakhpur, as the president of the Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti. The Mahant, who later defected to the BJP and went on to become a member of Parliament, had served as MP in the late 1960s and his claim to fame was

his participation in the anti-cow slaughter agitation in the 1950s. But for more than a decade, limelight had eluded him, and he was quick to seize the opportunity by adopting a very strident tone.

A significant feature of the VHP growth in the early years of the 1980s, and the subsequent formation of the body agitating for the "liberation of Ram Janmabhoomi", was the total failure by all political adversaries of the RSS, to assess the impact these developments would have in India, in a matter of a few years. While Indira Gandhi had her reasons for tacitly supporting the activities of the VHP, the developments were also ignored by the non-Congress parties as they were engaged in trying to cobble together a joint front to fight Indira Gandhi in the next general elections, scheduled in early 1985. It was also indicative of the lack of political foresight on the part of the parties opposed to the idea of Hindutva, and this trait was to become a recurring factor as the advocates of the Hindutva idea grew in strength over the years.

In 1984, the VHP was quick to realise the appeal long marches had for the average Hindu mind. The success of the Ekatmata Yagna had emboldened the VHP, and the new organisation announced its decision to take out another march this time to be called Shri Ram Janki Rath Yatra. The VHP cavalcade was to start its journey from the town of Sitamarhi in Bihar believed to be the birthplace of Sita, and would end in New Delhi on an aggressive note, after warning the government that unless the shrine at Ayodhya was handed over to the Hindus, it would bring the country to a grinding halt. The VHP opted for the march because it had a high appeal value for the average Hindu mind, as it had strong parallels to the tradition of *tirthas* (pilgrimages). The cavalcade, with its bedecked vehicles also had a high visibility and attracted curious bystanders, thus giving an opportunity to the VHP leaders, to have a captive audience for their speeches. The marches and the cavalcades would in later years be an important and constant feature in the VHP campaign. It would form a part of the VHP strategy, to use traditional motifs

and symbols to its advantage.

The Shri Ram Janaki Rath Yatra started rolling from Sitamarhi on September 23, 1984 and after winding its way through the plains of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, reached Ayodhya on October 6. A public meeting was held the next day on the banks of the river Saryu, at which the assembled people pledged their resolve to "liberate Ram Janmabhoomi from the clutches of barbaric invaders". The pledge was read by an important Hindu religious leader and repeated by the crowd. The Yatra resumed its journey from Ayodhya the next day, and after traversing some more towns reached Lucknow on October 14, 1984. In a massive show of strength in the state capital, the VHP leaders paraded through the city and later held a public gathering at the Begum Hazrat Mahal Park, which was attended by a crowd that the VHP claimed was more than one million. By the time the Yatra headed out of the state capital, it had started getting popular support from the Hindu masses. At that time the nature of the dispute in Ayodhya was not known to the people, and the VHP publicised that the birthplace of Ram had been converted into a mosque by Babur. The VHP leaders also declared that this had annoyed the gods and in 1949, Ram decided to appear in the mosque in the form of an idol. This led to the conversion of the mosque into a temple, but the government had locked it up since, and did not allow devotees to pray inside the shrine.

At that time the VHP had restricted its demand to unlocking of the gate of the shrine, and throwing it open to Hindu devotees. There was no mention of the Hindutva idea, and the larger world view that the advocates of the idea now preach. This was one of the main factors why the political adversaries of the RSS did not react to the developments of the early 1980s. The demand was found to be "innocuous and the real intent was cleverly disguised".<sup>33</sup> From Lucknow, the Yatra made its way towards Delhi through the plains of Uttar Pradesh. Its progress was slow as in every town, the Yatra would halt and the VHP and other religious leaders would deliver speeches explaining to the people

how Ram was "jailed in his own birthplace". The Yatra arrived on the outskirts of Delhi on October 30, 1984 and was scheduled to make its entry in the capital city the next day. The VHP had planned a public rally in the lawns of the Boat Club the venue of most political rallies. However, Indira Gandhi was assassinated early next morning at her residence by her bodyguards and this forced the VHP to pull the shutters down. For the second time, the RSS had suffered a setback because of the assassination of a national leader. But, while it came under sharp attack after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, there was nothing similar in 1984. Riots that followed the assassination and subsequent political developments forced the VHP to put the agitation of the Ram temple in the back seat. But, there was no denying that the VHP had come to have a dominant presence in Indian polity and it was further aided by the scant attention given to its manoeuvrings by adversaries.

### **Experimenting With Strategy**

It is clear the RSS shifted its focus from its political affiliate to the VHP in the early 1980s, and this was one of the factors that led to the rise and growth of the VHP. But, the BJP floundered and failed to emerge as an alternative to the Congress and instead spent the early years of 1980s, in the futile exercise of forging a united front against Indira Gandhi, and later against Rajiv Gandhi after her assassination. After the leadership of the party succeeded in forcing the acceptance of the mixed policies of the new party at its first plenary session in Bombay in December 1980, the BJP was content at being able to reclaim the bases of the former Jana Sangh. Elections had been held for the legislative assemblies in the nine states where Indira Gandhi had performed credibly in the general elections, and in these states, the BJP was able to register its political presence. The trend continued in subsequent by-elections in various parts of the country and in May 1982, it registered its best performance when

it won 29 assembly seats in Himachal Pradesh, out of a total of 68 seats. The BJP was the largest political party in the state legislature, and what made the victory particularly significant was the fact that it had not contested the May 1982 elections to the state assemblies of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and West Bengal, in alliance with any other party.

This strategy was adopted by the party's national executive in February 1982 where the leaders rejected the concept of a national front to oppose Indira Gandhi. Instead, the executive body decided to fashion out its electoral strategy out instead of "carrying out unending talks about unity".<sup>34</sup> The national executive was also categorical about the future shape of the BJP when it resolved that the BJP would "retain its separate identity".<sup>35</sup> However, the gains of the May 1982 state assembly elections were not a part of a trend, as the BJP suffered humiliating reverses in 1983. In the June 5 elections to the state assembly in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Indira Gandhi cleverly split up the state into a Hindu Jammu region and a Muslim Kashmir Valley. This led to her party winning all the seats in Jammu and the National Conference led by Farooq Abdullah the son of Sheikh Abdullah who had signed the Accord of 1975 with Indira Gandhi won the seats in the Muslim-dominated areas in the Valley of Kashmir. The BJP failed to win a single seat, and in each of the constituencies where it had fielded candidates, the margin of defeat was humiliating. This was true even of constituencies where the Jana Sangh had a significant and traditional support base. The results of the elections to the state assemblies of the two southern states Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh also did not give credence to the claim of the BJP, that it had made significant strides in the southern states.

However, these results were a part of the phase of electoral shocks for the BJP, that started with the elections for the two local bodies of Delhi. Elections for the Metropolitan Council and the Municipal Corporation were held in February 1983 and the BJP leadership hoped to muster a majority. The hopes however,

were dashed by the voters who opted for the Congress. Delhi, a traditional Jana Sangh base due to the RSS's role after Partition, and also because of the large presence of the trading community that formed the bulwark of the BJP's support base. However, in the February 1983 elections, the BJP succeeded in winning only 19 of the 56 Municipal Corporation seats and 37 of the 100 Metropolitan Council seats. In these elections, the BJP lost to the Congress the majority of constituencies dominated by people who had migrated from Pakistan during Partition. On the other hand, the party did make some inroads into Muslim-dominated areas and also in the new settlements on the outskirts of the capital. The elections of 1983 gave credence to a growing suspicion that the RSS had begun shifting its loyalties to the Congress. This was most evident in Delhi and Jammu, where the BJP candidates failed to get a significant number of votes, even in areas that were considered strongholds of the RSS. While none of the senior RSS leaders issued a formal statement, it was clear that a growing number of *swayamsevaks* were turning to the Congress, and away from the BJP. This was seemingly accepted by the RSS leadership and was viewed by the cadre as a silent endorsement of their decision. It is not difficult to find reasons for this change of faith by the loyalties of the RSS activists. At that time Indira Gandhi was taking a strident line against growing Sikh fundamentalism, by dividing the state of Jammu and Kashmir on communal lines. She thus helped forge Hindu solidarity in the state. She was also maintaining a non-critical position on the most significant of contemporary RSS programmes i.e. the campaigns of the VHP. In the early 1980s there were strong parallels between the RSS's approach with that of Golwalkar's decision in the 1940s to disengage itself from the Hindu Mahasabha, and to project itself as a cultural ally of the Congress. It appeared that the RSS believed that only the Congress had the ability to convert India into a Hindu *Rashtra*. Indira Gandhi was quick to realise this and the situation was to her advantage.

The disenchantment of the RSS leadership showed up in an article in the RSS organ, *Organiser*, where the writer was critical of the BJP for playing down the Hindu content of the party's policies. The writer argued that while he did not have any problems with the BJP's efforts to attract non-Hindus into its folds, but these attempts may also be seen by many as a "certain weakening of character".<sup>36</sup> Following the debacle in Delhi, Vajpayee offered his resignation, but the party persuaded him to carry on and elected him for a second term in March 1983. The electoral reverses resulted in the BJP attempting to forge a democratic alliance with other non-Congress parties. It made some headway in this respect. Leaders of 13 non-Congress parties met at a conclave convened by the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, N.T. Rama Rao. There was a broad agreement that the parties should try to work in tandem. The National Council of the BJP met at Indore in Madhya Pradesh in the first week of January 1984. It took stock of the political developments since Vajpayee was re-elected party president. Vajpayee, in his opening remarks declared that the nine months between the two sessions had "been eventful, even productive. In Delhi, I had given you an appraisal. I had also offered you a concept. In my appraisal I had painted a dark picture of the country's drift and of the wrong direction in which the government was heading. In my concept, I saw immediate hope of meeting this challenge through the formation of a national democratic alliance...Events during the last nine months have fully vindicated my appraisal and even gone beyond its worst fears about this government's perversity. However, at the same time, our efforts during the last nine months have also resulted in the formation of the National Democratic Alliance".<sup>37</sup>

The much-touted alliance that Vajpayee mentioned was in fact little beyond a fragile understanding between the BJP and the Lok Dal headed by Charan Singh. When elections were held in December 1984 after Indira Gandhi's assassination, even this link snapped and the BJP had to go in for the elections without



any allies at a national level though it succeeded in cobbling together regional allies in some states. The 'sympathy wave' and the fears of a extremist takeover of the country led to a landslide victory of the Congress led by Rajiv Gandhi the party won 401 of the 508 seats that it contested. The BJP, along with the other opposition parties, was decimated. The BJP contested 221 seats and won in only two one in Gujarat and the other in Andhra Pradesh. The entire top leadership of the party, including Vajpayee, suffered humiliating defeats. However, the BJP leaders took solace in the fact that though routed in the elections, it still managed to secure 7.7 per cent of the total votes. Not only was the party's share second to the Congress it secured 49.16 per cent of the votes but the figure was fairly close to the best performance of the Jana Sangh in 1967 when it secured 9.4 per cent of the votes.

In the general elections there were indications that the RSS cadre had thrown their lot behind the Congress. Assumedly because of the threat to the security of India arising from the assassination and the steadfast refusal of the Congress either under Indira Gandhi or under her son to be critical of the RSS. The BJP image however, was one of a party whose activists had come to the rescue of Sikhs targeted in the anti-Sikh riots of November 1984. While the Congress was considered to be instrumental in sparking off attacks against Sikhs in several cities in north India the worst riots being in Delhi where nearly three thousand Sikhs were killed in a span of four days the BJP was emerging as a champion of secular politics in Delhi. This had an immediate impact in the elections when the BJP did creditably in those areas dominated by Sikhs but had little support in areas with a predominant Hindu population.

Predictably, the results of the elections were the main issue for discussion at the BJP national executive in January. With a few exceptions all speakers who spoke at the three-day meeting were critical of Vajpayee's national democratic alliance theory. The meeting resolved that the party would not join a national

front but that electoral adjustments should not be ruled out. There was also a debate about which principles the BJP needed to adopt. This was the beginning of a recurrent phase in the party when the earlier question of choosing one of the two legacies Jai Prakash Narain's or the Jana Sangh's resurfaced. There was a growing demand that the BJP revert to the traditional approach of the Jana Sangh and abandon the policies of JP. The party, which in its election manifesto released just a month earlier had said nothing about the situation in Kashmir, now adopted the old Jana Sangh demand of abrogating Article 370 of the Constitution that gave special privileges to the state. The executive also demanded that the government should give a nuclear edge to the Indian defence capabilities. The process of the BJP reverting to the traditional symbols of the Jana Sangh began with the executive meeting. This process was strengthened at the next executive session in July 1985, when the BJP abandoned the principle of Gandhian Socialism while adopting Integral Humanism as the guiding philosophy of the party. Meanwhile, the BJP leaders also started attending meetings of the *samanyavaya samitis* in certain states. This was an indication that the BJP leadership realised that their prospects were not good unless they secured the support of the RSS cadre. To do this, the party would have to reconsider the structured philosophical approach of the RSS and the Jana Sangh.

### **Recovering From The Setback**

By October 1985, both the VHP and the BJP had recovered from the numbing shock of their election debacle and had initiated plans to seize the centre-stage of the political theatre of India. On the first anniversary of India Gandhi's assassination, the Dharam Sansad started its two-day deliberations at Udipi in the southern state of Karnataka. They ended with the threat that unless the Union government initiated steps to unlock the disputed shrine at Ayodhya and throw it open to Hindu devotees,

several Hindu religious leaders led by Mahant Ramchandra Paramhans Das, the chief of Digambar Akhara, the 'skyclads', would self-immolate themselves in front of the shrine. A committee was formed of various religious leaders who would coordinate with the VHP leaders in managing the agitation and pressing for the demand of the organisation. Meanwhile, the BJP was considering the report of a small committee appointed by Vajpayee to review the functioning of the BJP since its inception. The committee agreed with the decision of the national executive that the BJP must adopt the policy of Integral Humanism in place of Gandhian Socialism even though the party must adopt a "Gandhian approach" to the socio-economic problems. There was a protracted debate in party circles over the nature of symbols that the BJP and its leadership should project. However, there was very little discussion on the ideological policies of the party. Rather, the moot points were the image that would be projected through the symbols on the facade of the party edifice.

Subsequent to the Dharam Sansad at Udiipi, the VHP initiated the process of lobbying Congress ministers and other party leaders to secure support for the demand of opening the locked door. Though he has denied it formally, there are suggestions that a key role was played by Arun Nehru, Rajiv Gandhi's cousin and Minister of Internal Security. Another Congress leader who was "broadly supportive"<sup>38</sup> of the VHP demand was Vir Bahadur Singh, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh at that time. What followed was a series of meetings between various VHP and Congress leaders. One of these key meetings was between Singh and Vishwanath Katju, president of the VHP and some other leaders of the organisation. The meeting was held at Ayodhya on December 19, 1985. The crucial factor at the meeting was Singh's willingness, to allow legal experts to study the details of the ongoing title dispute, and so find a way by which the lock could be opened without attracting contempt of court. Katju in the meeting made it clear that the burden of finding a way to accede to the VHP demand, lay with the state government and

that unless the demand for unlocking the gate was met, the VHP would continue with the agitation. Furthermore, the VHP would not be able to guarantee that the religious leaders who had previously declared their intention of immolating themselves would not actually carry out their threat. A VHP account says that when Singh "visited Ayodhya on the occasion of the Ramayan Mela sponsored by government agencies, a few of us headed by Mr Katju had assembled at Ayodhya to press for our demand for the liberation of Sri Ram Janmabhoomi... The Chief Minister did not then give any reply but listened to all that was said before him in an impassioned plea for the removal of the said locks".<sup>39</sup> It is particularly interesting to note that even at this late stage in the agitation for the "liberation of Ram Janmabhoomi" the VHP did not state that its main demand was for a new temple in place of the Babri Masjid. There was also no inkling of the temple agitation being merely a part of the wider agitation for the spread of the Hindutva idea. The demand until 1985 was restricted to the question of opening the gate that had been locked up in 1949, following the idols being forcibly installed inside the mosque. At a casual glance the VHP demand appeared to be fairly harmless and this gave rise to complacency among the political adversaries of the RSS. Rajiv Gandhi's government had not viewed the VHP as its adversary for, until that time there were no visible links between the VHP and the BJP. The feeling was in fact, that they stood to gain from the agitation as they would be seen by the majority Hindus as being instrumental in allowing them access to the idols.

### **Unlocking The Mosque**

There was a flurry of activity as the Congress made hectic efforts to acquiesce to the VHP demand. Files were requisitioned and legal luminaries including one senior judge of the Supreme Court were consulted. The VHP had been claiming that the order to lock up the gate of the shrine had not been a judicial verdict but

had been a simple administrative measure and that there would not be a case of contempt of court if the gate was unlocked. The VHP also accepted the Congress government's attempt to help them in opening the gate. The organisation's account of that period states: "A close search of the records appears to have been ordered."<sup>40</sup> Finally, the contention of the VHP was found to be true and it was decided that the local courts in Faizabad would be petitioned. In the last week of January 1986, Umesh Chandra Pandey, a young lawyer practising in the Faizabad district court, was asked by local VHP and Congress leaders to file a petition in the local court. He first appealed to the local *munsif*. But when the petition was turned down, Pandey went to the District Judge on February 1, 1986. As the judge had already been made aware of the legal position of the complicated dispute, he declared that there was no judicial restraint on unlocking the two gates leading to the inside of the mosque. When examined the Senior Superintendent of Police told the judge that there would be no threat to peace if the locks were opened. Whereupon the judge ordered the unlocking of the gates. The order was implemented by the local authorities the same day in "as much time as it took a police officer to reach Sri Ram Janmabhoomi at Ayodhya from the courtroom of the district judge at Faizabad".<sup>41</sup> This clearly established the intention of the State machinery to accede to the VHP demand. While there was much jubilation in the twin cities now that Ram had been liberated, there was great consternation among Muslims that they were not allowed to intervene in the case heard by the judge. The Muslims had rushed to the court after hearing that Pandey's petition had been admitted. It is now clear that the details of the order and subsequent action had been worked out well in advance so there could and would be no deviation. The VHP had won the day and thousands of Hindu devotees assembled around the Babri Masjid. They queued in front of its gate for the chance to have a *darshan* of the idols installed there more than 36 years before. The irony of these developments is that there was tacit complicity, of the Congress

government, in the decision to allow access without giving the Muslim contenders a chance to present their case.

The VHP had been at the forefront of the Ayodhya campaign up until the events of February 1, 1986, but they were now joined by several groups of angry Muslim leaders. Predictably, there were howls of protest from the Muslims concerning the decision of the Faizabad judge and the subsequent action. This not only vitiated the political atmosphere in the country, but also led to a series of violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims, in several parts of the country. The day after the Babri Masjid was thrown open, the twin cities of Faizabad remained calm in spite of rising tension as the Muslims there decided to observe a 'bandh'. Prohibitory orders were clamped in the two towns even as Hashim Ansari despatched angry letters to the President and the Prime Minister, seeking their intervention. Muslims in Ayodhya were still reeling under the shock of the mosque being handed over to the Hindus as Muslim leaders in Delhi began chalking out their strategy. The nine-member working committee of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board met in the capital on February 2, 1986 and expressed its "deep sense of shock at the virtual handing over of the Babri Masjid to the Hindu community, without any decision on the substantive question of origin and title".<sup>42</sup> The body, one of the apex Muslim organisations, was composed of both religious and political leaders. It had members from both the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam a fact which contradicts the claims made later by the advocates of the Hindutva idea, that while the Shias were willing to hand over the mosque to the Hindus, the Sunnis were unwilling.

The board also tried to explain what the handing over of the mosque to the Hindus meant. The board stated that "this unilateral seizure will only serve to undermine the faith of the Muslim community in the political order and the judicial system".<sup>43</sup> However, the meeting did not sound a clarion call for any confrontationist posture. It asked the Muslims to "act with

restraint and not in anger, to pray to Allah for the liberation of the Masjid".<sup>44</sup> The meeting concluded with an appeal to the government to prevent *puja* in the mosque till the "title suits pending"<sup>45</sup> were decided and requested "political parties and all secular forces to support the demand for the restoration of the mosque to the Muslim community".<sup>46</sup> The All India Muslim Youth Conference also held a meeting in Delhi on the same day and called for "legal and political pressure to regain the mosque".<sup>47</sup> Even as the Muslim community indicated and demonstrated its anger a day after the opening of the locks, the VHP refused to keep a low profile. Sensing that it stood to gain by precipitating the deterioration of the tense communal atmosphere, it gave a call to observe February 4, 1986 as Victory Day an action which was bound to evoke protests from the Muslims. Hindus took out victory processions in several parts of north India, for till then the influence of the VHP was concentrated in this part of the country. Predictably, Muslims reacted against the celebrations leading to Hindu-Muslim clashes in several townships near Faizabad.

Barely 72 hours had passed since the Babri Masjid had been opened up to Hindu devotees, when the communal situation started to nosedive. Syed Shahabuddin, the acting president of the Majlis-e-Mushawarat, another representative body of the Muslim leadership, gave a call that Muslims should observe February 14, 1986 as a black day of mourning, replete with black flags and badges. He urged Muslims in every part of the country to petition local authorities and demand the restoration of the mosque. Even as Ayodhya was wearing a "festive look and received thousands of Hindu pilgrims"<sup>48</sup> pouring in from the neighbouring areas, the VHP and the Muslim leadership were locking horns. Muslims from all over India passed angry resolutions, even as the VHP mounted a campaign by demanding that the custody of the shrine be handed over to a trust floated by themselves. This trust would be given the independence to rebuild the existing structure. Angry demonstrations by Muslims

in various parts of north India became the order of the day. In Aligarh, the students of Aligarh Muslim University, observed a protest day on February 7. The resulting tension led to the closure of the university for six days thereafter.

On February 10, 1986 the president of the Uttar Pradesh unit of the BJP, Kalyan Singh, who would later be installed as the Chief Minister of the state government, headed by his party, called upon the Union government to take action against Muslim leaders, who refused to accept the judicial verdict on the opening of the shrine. The irony of this being that the demand for action against non-acceptance of a judicial verdict was first made by a person who would later be among the main votaries of the BJP argument, that the Ayodhya dispute was not an issue that could be decided by the judiciary.

By this time a key Muslim leader who had been biding his time, came to the forefront. Syed Shahabuddin, a member of the Indian Foreign Service until 1978 when he quit to join the Janata Party, emerged on the scene and started projecting himself as a frontline Muslim leader. On February 6, 1986, he wrote to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi shortly before his departure for the Maldives on a state visit. In the letter, Shahabuddin stated that the episode in Ayodhya had "created a deep sense of humiliation" among Muslims and that "they do not know what to do and whom to turn to".<sup>49</sup> The former IFS officer was no doubt making a case for his own emergence as the undisputed Muslim leader in India when he stated in the same letter that it would be "a sad day if an entire community is pushed against the wall with no one to speak for them and none to comprehend the anguish of their heart".<sup>50</sup> After establishing his credentials as a person capable of articulating the grievances of the Muslims, Shahabuddin was clear about what he wanted: "The order of the District Judge was addressed to the defendants, namely, the government of Uttar Pradesh, which meekly complied with it. It is for the state government to file an appeal or a writ petition before the High Court against the order praying that status quo



ante be restored till the question of title is finally settled... As custodian of the dignity of a minority community because of its nationwide implications, the central government should also intervene in the case and the Attorney General of India should be deputed to represent its point of view...You may kindly advise the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh to file an appeal and seek an urgent hearing."<sup>51</sup> Shahabuddin however, was not unaware of the government's limitations. In another letter to the Union Home Minister on the same day, he stated that it "may not be possible for the government to concede the demand of the restoration of the Babri Masjid, to the community until the title suits are divided, but it should be possible for the government of UP to restore the status quo as on February 1, 1986".<sup>52</sup>

At this time also a Muslim petition had reached the High Court seeking a review of the order of the District Judge. When this was refused, they approached Vir Bahadur Singh on February 10, to intervene in the case. But their demand was dismissed. By the time the Muslims heeded Shahabuddin's call to observe February 14, 1986 as a black day, the communal situation in the entire state of Uttar Pradesh had become volatile. Many other parts of the country had become affected and in Delhi, police opened firing on a demonstration staged by angry Muslims of the walled city. This resulted in the death of two Muslim youths, and led to the imposition of indefinite curfew in the affected areas of the city. The Mushawarat submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister on the same day charging that the VHP had "systematically carried out a campaign for the last two years for the physical occupation of the Babri Masjid on the alleged ground that it stands on the birthsite of Ram. They have deliberately tried to build up a religious hysteria....This campaign is not religious but political. It is to destroy the secular order, to subvert the rule of the law and to humiliate the Muslim community. To nurture hatred and ill feeling between the Hindu and Muslim communities and generally prepare the country for a takeover by fascist forces in the name of Hindu chauvinism".<sup>53</sup>

The memorandum also stated that following the opening of the locks of the Babri Masjid, the faith of the Muslims in "the secular order had been eroded; their confidence in the judiciary has been shaken; for them the constitutional guarantees have been drained out of all meaning and the rule of law has become a farce; the political system has shown itself to be subservient to the forces of chauvinism and revanchism; the mass media including Doordarshan have turned into purveyors of one-sided propaganda because the picture presented by them has been so distorted as to be beyond recognition, as if no masjid exists at all and it is the Muslims who are creating a dispute by obstructing the Hindus from praying in the temple".<sup>54</sup> The memorandum made it clear that while the Mushawarat had no illusions about the complicity of the Congress party and the Union government in allowing infiltration of the Babri Masjid, it did not want to criticise the Indian state in overt terms.

However, the manner in which the Muslim leadership conducted its agitation for the restoration of the Babri Masjid in the initial weeks, suggested that unwittingly perhaps, it gave the impression that it was headed for a confrontation with the Hindu community, and not with the Indian State. This was in contrast to the campaign launched by a section of the Muslim leadership on the question of granting maintenance to the Muslim woman, divorced by her husband. The issue had dominated the greater part of 1985 following the Supreme Court verdict delivered in April of that year. It held that a Muslim woman had right to maintenance after divorce even following the payment after the customary three month period of *iddat* till her death or her remarriage. The judgment was hailed by the Muslim intelligentsia as a positive development, but there were shrieks of protest from the Muslim leadership which charged the Supreme Court with interference in the Muslim Personal Law. A sustained campaign was launched and finally the Union government bowed to the demand of the Muslim leaders and passed an Act in Parliament which specified that maintenance to a divorced Muslim woman

need not be paid by her former husband beyond the customary period of *iddat* or three lunar cycles, if the woman was no longer menstruating.<sup>55</sup> The government's decision was projected by the VHP as an instance of Muslim appeasement of the government and was used in the temple campaign. The agitation to reverse the Supreme Court judgment was directed against the Indian state by the Muslim leaders, and not against the Hindus as the case appeared in the context of the Babri Masjid. In later years, Jawed Habeeb, a Muslim journalist who emerged as a key Muslim leader said that in the initial stages the Muslim leadership should not have tried to "take on the Hindus, but should have been more critical of the Congress, and gone to the non-sectarian section of Hindus instead of addressing themselves solely to the Muslims".<sup>56</sup> By the third week of February 1986, the battle lines had been drawn. On one side was the VHP which was now getting increasing support from the Hindu masses by promoting the idea Muslims were opposed to prayers at the alleged birthsite. On the other side, were various Muslim leaders, cutting across party lines in many cases, who were slowly moving towards forging a joint front to combat the VHP campaign. At this point, the Union government refused to be drawn into any action and preferred to play the role of a passive audience, provoked into action only when it had to police riot-affected towns.

Rajiv Gandhi personified his mother's approach of turning a Nelson's eye to the activities of the VHP. Neither he, nor any of his political confidants had the political acumen to anticipate the political potential of the temple agitation. Besides, there were indications that some of his most trusted political allies were more than sympathetic to the cause of the VHP. Sharing the belief that the mosque had been built after the demolition of a temple and that it should be handed back to the Hindus. Rajiv Gandhi was not alone in failing to sense the potential and resolve of the VHP, and its ability to slowly pitchfork itself into the centre stage of the Indian political theatre. The non-Congress parties, barring

the BJP, condemned the opening of the locks and the two communist parties the CPI(M) and the CPI also charged the government with complicity. These statements however, were issued long after the opening of the locks had permeated to the lowest levels in the Muslim community. These parties could no longer therefore project themselves as the the first upholders of the minority rights. Had these parties taken the lead immediately after the opening of the locks, and not waited for more than a fortnight, the communal situation would not have turned so vicious. The VHP would have not been able to convince the Hindus that Muslims *per se*, were opposed to them offering prayers to the idols installed in the mosque. By allowing the Muslim leadership to take the initiative in fighting for the restoration of the Babri Masjid, these parties were as much responsible as all other political forces for vitiating the communal atmosphere in 1986.

### **Protests Galore**

Throughout February 1986, the lead in protest actions against the decision of the Faizabad District Judge was being taken by the Muslim leaders with Shahabuddin at the forefront. Articulate, and well educated, he drew upon his experience of being a member of the Indian Foreign Service. He projected a different image from the traditional small-town Muslim politician. He also perfected the art of projecting a dual facade. At home and among people from the same social class, he would be dressed in informal Western attire, but whenever he faced the Muslims at the grassroots, he would present himself in the traditional robes donned by Muslims. Shahabuddin, even in the early stages of the confrontation between the VHP and the Muslim leadership, was slowly becoming the hate symbol projected by the VHP, and he was enjoying every bit of it. He convened a meeting of Muslim members of Parliament on February 20, 1986 because the situation "demands a calm appraisal with a view to arrive at a strategy

for undoing the wrong to the community. Forgetting all our political differences, all Muslim MPs must therefore put their heads together to find the way out."<sup>57</sup>

The meeting turned out to be an eventful one not so much for the deliberations inside the Constitution Club in the capital, but for the thousands of activists of the Hindu Sangharsh Samiti, an organisation sponsored by the Delhi unit of the VHP, who turned up in large numbers, and raised slogans against the Muslims MPs who were deliberating inside. An official press release of the Samiti said that the protesters raised slogans like '*ab koi Babur paida naheen hone denge*' ("now we shall not let another Babur be born"). B.L. Sharma 'Prem', convener of the Samiti at that time (he became a BJP MP from a constituency in Delhi in 1991) declared that "some communal-minded leaders were creating internal trouble in India with foreign help. The Muslims should accept the reality of Indian history, and create an atmosphere of brotherhood to live a peaceful and harmonious life, like members of one family."<sup>58</sup> Other speakers who addressed the assembled activists of the Samiti said that "foreign invaders had demolished Hindu temples and hammered our nationhood, and their supporters would not be allowed to repeat the same and that the responsibility for the disintegration of the country would rest on the Muslim leaders."<sup>59</sup>

This demonstration in the capital was also important because this was the first time that Ram was sought to be equated with Indian nationalism, and the loyalty to the mythological hero was projected as a yardstick to determine patriotic fervour. One of the slogans raised at the demonstration was "Voice against Ram is a voice against the nation".<sup>60</sup> This slogan would be the basis of the argument of the advocates of the Hindutva idea in later years when justifying the agitation for the Ram temple. It would come to acquire a boisterous tone and would be mouthed vociferously. But in February 1986, those opposing the RSS and its affiliates failed to comprehend the implications of the slogan, and the future shape and canon of the temple agitation. The

views expressed by the Samiti during this demonstration were to be echoed in subsequent years, by the leaders and publications of the VHP. A VHP publication published nearly two years after the locks of the Babri Masjid were opened, recounts the Muslim reaction after the events thus: "The Muslims who did not believe in the Indian Constitution, and did not accept the judicial process of the country, started a vicious and poisonous campaign. They boycotted the Republic Day (a call given by Muslim leaders but later withdrawn) and by other actions proved that the Muslims did not believe in the country's tradition, culture, society and law".<sup>61</sup> It must be noted that even in the aggressive campaign initiated by the Muslim leaders, their main demand was that the lock should not have been opened till the disposal of the title suits pending in the Faizabad courts. Since this had been done, the government of Uttar Pradesh should petition the High Court to reverse the verdict of the District Judge. Nowhere in their campaign did the Muslim leaders state that they would not accept the judicial verdict, even if the award went against them and the disputed shrine was declared to be a temple.

Within a month of opening the locks, the situation in several parts of India had become heated and was on the boil. Muslims all over India reacted against Hindus taking over the mosque. The virulent VHP campaign was allowed to continue unchecked in several parts of the country. Victory processions were taken out with the express aim of inflaming Muslim sentiments and in places where they reacted to these processions there were violent clashes. Similarly, Muslims took out protest demonstrations and when Hindus tried preventing the marches, there were riots. In the absence of any political initiative from a crippled opposition, Muslim leaders had a field day. The situation was ideal for them to try to gain a pivotal position in Indian polity, and they were not slow in realising this. While the keen tussle for securing the pre-eminent position was not an obvious one, it was clear that the contingent bonhomie exhibited by Muslim leaders in public

would not stay for long. It was not long before ego supplanted protest, especially when greater importance was accorded to the views of another.

Syed Shahabuddin emerged as one of the leading voices of the 'Tehrik-e-Bazyabi-e-Babri Masjid' (Movement for the Restoration of the Babri Masjid). 'Muslim India', the journal he edited emerged as a significant platform, where the views of many Muslim leaders were collated. In the March issue of the journal, the first after the "unilateral seizure", Shahabuddin wrote that after the episode at Ayodhya "for all practical purposes the Indian state has been transformed into a Hindu state. The transformation had been going behind the facade of secularism for quite some time. Now that political expediency has come to outweigh ideological considerations in the calculation of politicians, no pretense is any longer necessary. Hence the mask is off. Realism demands that the facade be dismantled, the Muslim community should apply its mind to the shape of things to come in order to prepare itself for a long and hard struggle".<sup>62</sup> Shahabuddin's journal and his endeavour were controversial because of his choice of the phrase 'Muslim India' as the name of the journal. People were highly critical of him, arguing that the journal should be named 'Indian Muslim'. Shahabuddin has also been criticised by fellow politicians and several intellectuals for launching a campaign that was too aggressive. The fact that his political ambitions overtook his desire to actually right the wrong was also pointed out. In fact among the Muslim politicians at the forefront of the campaign for the restoration of the Babri Masjid, one of the most controversial roles has been played by Shahabuddin. But, in 1986, the former IFS officer was immune to such criticism and in the same issue he contended:

"Muslim India, written off in cold blood by M.A. Jinnah, survived the trauma of vivisection. Muslim India survived communal carnage, economic strangulation, religious restrictions, pressures of assimilation and absorption, political mar-

ginalisation....Muslim India shall survive the loss of the Babri Masjid. But,

- \* Shall India survive?
- \* Shall India of Gandhi and Nehru survive?
- \* Shall the democratic system survive?
- \* Shall the rule of law survive?"<sup>63</sup>

When Shahabuddin wrote these lines there were many, including some among the Muslim intelligentsia, who felt that he was being alarmist and that the VHP agitation did not have such threatening potential. Some of colleagues in the Janata Party charged him with the habit of crying wolf all the time. But, these were all questions that Shahabuddin, for all his political cunningness, posed in March 1986, and as events have later established, the India that Shahabuddin was talking about has not actually been able to survive. Meanwhile the Muslims of India have lost the Babri Masjid and the community is at the crossroads.

Throughout the first half of 1986, the debate raged incessantly. The VHP stepped up its campaign and declared that the opening of the locks was the first step in building a magnificent temple in place of the existing structure they refused to term the Babri Masjid as a mosque. The leaders spearheading the movement for the restoration of the mosque argued that "try as we might to project the Babri Masjid question as a question of democracy and secularism of Constitution and rule of law, of progress and development, the needle finally gets stuck in the groove of Hindu-Muslim interaction. It becomes a Hindu-Muslim question".<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, with the law and order situation remaining as volatile as it was in the immediate aftermath of opening the locks, the Union government and other non-BJP parties either maintained a studied silence, or refrained from adopting a path where agitations were the only instruments. This prompted the Muslim leadership to conclude that: "In such a conflict, not only the government, but the political system as a whole objectively sides with the numerically superior side out of electoral com-



pulsions".<sup>65</sup> This argument did not appear far-fetched in 1986, the Hindu vote bank was beginning to surface but at that time there were no takers, for the BJP was not yet part of the consideration. The Congress clearly thought that they stood to gain electorally if a Hindu vote bank fructified. The unsubtle aim of Rajiv Gandhi was a carbon copy of his mother's: Allow the VHP to continue with its campaign and thus gain the electoral support of the RSS cadre disillusioned as it was with the BJP for pursuing the legacy of Jai Prakash Narain. Rajiv Gandhi was in fact attempting to ride two horses at the same time. The reasoning was that the Muslim conservatives had been satisfied by the enactment of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, and the Hindus were being assuaged by the opening of the Babri Masjid. However realpolitik was not as quite simple as that envisaged by the Congress in 1986. It took a long time to realise this, but by then the communalisation of Indian polity had become an irreversible process.

By the middle of 1986, the reality of a deteriorating Hindu-Muslim relationship had become evident in large areas of India. The hegemony of the Ram temple issue was now apparent. It was the BJP which threw a spanner in the Congress works. Throughout 1985, as already mentioned, the party had witnessed a fiery debate about the nature of the symbols that the party was to project. By the time the locks on the gates of the Babri Masjid had been opened, it was becoming increasingly clear that the BJP was poised for a turnaround and return to the legacy of the Jana Sangh and thereby come closer to the RSS and become a more active member of the sangh parivar. The final departure from the legacy of Jai Prakash Narain came in May 1986 at the plenary session of the party in Bombay. The most significant decision taken at this meeting held between May 9-11, 1986 was the election of Lal Krishna Advani as party president and the near total sidelining of Vajpayee and his policies. In his speech, after being elected party president, Advani was emphatic in emphasising the Jana Sangh roots of the BJP. He also made no

attempts to hide his ties with the RSS of which he had once been a pracharak and had later worked in the *Organiser*, the weekly tabloid supported by the RSS. In his acceptance speech, Advani made repeated references to the demands of the RSS and the Jana Sangh. He made it clear that the demand for the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution would be high on the priority list of the BJP. He also categorically stated that his party would be steadfast in its demand for a Uniform Civil Code and criticised the Union government for bowing to the demand of the Muslim leadership on the Shah Bano case, by enacting the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986. Advani also made repeated oblique appeals to the RSS cadre to support the BJP. He argued that the party was better poised to protect the political interests of the Hindus, rather than the Congress which was projected as a party that would bow to various pressure groups. By the time the plenary session of the BJP ended, it was clear that the BJP had returned to the Jana Sangh's image, and would project itself as a party whose first concern was to protect the political and social interests of the Hindus. It was also clear that it would seek closer working ties with RSS affiliates like the VHP even though at this stage there were no references to the Ayodhya issue. It must be noted that the Hindu nationalist ideology that the RSS believed in was not disguised by the BJP at this session, and it was clear that there would be no ideological dilution. It was a return to the ways of the Jana Sangh with the aim of forging ahead. This task was placed on the shoulders of Advani. In the four and a half year period of his presidency not only did his personal stature grow tremendously, but the BJP also experienced a manifold expansion having a clear influence on Indian polity. But to understand the growth of the BJP in the years after 1986, one shall need to trace the evolution of the Jana Sangh in its formative years after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the subsequent disaffection of the Congress with the RSS and its eventual ban.

## Early Political Moves

Fourteen years after its formation in 1951, the formal programme of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (previously and henceforth referred to as Jana Sangh) listed its main objective as "rebuilding of Bharat on the basis of Bharatiya *sanskriti* and *maryada*".<sup>66</sup> It went on to argue that the "outlook of Bharatiya *sanskriti* is integral," and asserted that concepts like "democracy, equality, national independence, and world peace are interrelated" that the West had failed to combine and this could only be done by Bharatiya *sanskriti* as it "offers the philosophical substratum on the basis of which these concepts can be harmonised". The basis of Bharatiya *sanskriti* are the four *purushastras* of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha* and in the Indian polity, "absolute sovereignty vests in *dharma* alone. Since society and mankind are guided by the four doctrines, the state is important, but not supreme," and the "conception of the ideal state of society is stateless and regulated entirely by *dharma*." The understanding and the policies of the Jana Sangh were further elaborated in the assertion that "from the Himalayas to Kanya Kumari in the south, this entire land of Bharatvarsh has always been one and indivisible geographically, culturally and historically". With such an understanding that the reality in the country suggests that the "existence of Pakistan not only means a separate political identity on Indian soil, it refutes the fact of one nationhood and one culture, and is a bid to keep the two-nations, two-culture theory alive".

Given such a backdrop, the Jana Sangh thus declared that its objective shall be "to end the separation of India and Pakistan and bring the two together".<sup>67</sup> Viewed in totality from the time the Jana Sangh was formed until the present day when the BJP is one of the main playwrights in the political theatre of India, one basic aim of this political affiliate of the RSS is to undo the wrongs that the RSS perceives has been wrought in history. In this way it has always been a backward-looking political party

that harps on the question of interpreting history and has little to offer in future except suggesting that once the "historical wrongs" are rectified, the "golden era" of history will stage a comeback on its own.

The formation of the Jana Sangh in 1951 was the outcome of a series of manoeuvres undertaken by the RSS leadership to prevent the complete marginalisation of the organisation, following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the subsequent ban on the RSS. The RSS, which had been in a pivotal position at the time of Independence and in the subsequent months when its activists were at the forefront of retaliatory attacks on Muslims, in several parts of north India. The nationalistic image of the organisation was bolstered even more by the devotion with which the *swayamsevaks* managed various relief camps where refugees from Pakistan came for temporary comfort. At that time there were even suggestions that the RSS and the Congress could work in tandem with the RSS devoting itself for the cultural upliftment of Indians and the Congress continuing as a political party. There were however pressures on the RSS leadership for a greater political role for the organisation, a view that was not shared by Golwalkar who felt that the Congress, because of its awesome machinery and elaborate network, was the best vehicle for carrying the ideology of the RSS. His approach was to slowly take over the ideological basis of the Congress, while others in the RSS felt that the organisation should itself be offering a political edge.

But, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1948 dramatically changed the scenario. Nathuram Godse, the assassin, had been a former member of the RSS, and even though the RSS had publicly distanced itself from the Hindu Mahasabha for Godse was a member of the organisation, in public perception, the RSS was equated with the Mahasabha, and held responsible for the assassination. What followed were attacks on RSS offices and the government was forced to ban the RSS and arrest Golwalkar, *several other RSS leaders, and about 20,000 swayamsevaks.* The

government was unable to prove the complicity of the RSS or any of its leaders in the assassination, as a result of which Golwalkar and a majority of RSS activists were released on August 5, 1948. Nevertheless, the ban was not lifted and Golwalkar was ordered to remain within the municipal limits of Nagpur. For the next few months, the basic activity of the RSS leaders was in trying to secure the lifting of the ban. Golwalkar started a correspondence with Nehru and Patel arguing that since there had been no evidence of the RSS's participation in the planning and execution of the assassination, the ban should be lifted. Golwalkar also shrewdly worked on the differences between Patel and Nehru by suggesting to Patel that "you with government power and we with organised cultural force combined can eliminate this menace (of communalism)".<sup>68</sup>

Nehru did not fall a prey to the arguments of Golwalkar and contended that the government had information about the violent nature of the RSS, and the anti-national character of the organisation. However, Patel had different notions about the RSS, and even suggested that the RSS members were free to join the Congress to continue with their work. Even as the negotiations between Golwalkar and the government representatives on the question of lifting of the ban continued, pressure was mounting from within the RSS, to give a political character to the organisation. Restrictions on his travel outside Nagpur were lifted in October 1948 as he had to come to Delhi for negotiations, but after the discussions ended, he was again placed under arrest and taken back to Nagpur. But even then Golwalkar was unwilling to convert the RSS into a political party arguing that "cultural work should be entirely free from political scramble".<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, the RSS also rejected the suggestion mooted by Patel that the RSS merge with the Congress and instead, Golwalkar directed his associates to resume the activities of the RSS in violation of government orders.

This was the first direct confrontation of the RSS with the government and this was given the shape of a civil disobedience

campaign launched on December 9, 1948 and continued till January 20, 1949 when the government indicated that it was willing to reconsider the ban order provided the RSS agreed to a written constitution. During the entire period of the ban several secret meetings were held between Patel and a key RSS leader Eknath Ranade. These meetings were often held at the initiative of mediators, and one such was held in Mussoorie at the residence of G.D. Birla, a leading industrialist. Without fail, Patel reiterated his argument that the RSS activists should join the Congress and help it to build an organisation base nationwide. There are also indications that Patel wanted to utilise the RSS in his power struggle against Nehru. His calculations were that if the RSS merged into the Congress, he would have a significant section of the party, that was personally loyal to him alone for Nehru had a known antipathy for the RSS. After the suspension of the confrontation in January 1949, RSS leaders got busy in preparing a draft constitution.

This job was entrusted to Ranade, Balasaheb Deoras, another senior RSS stalwart who would some years later play a decisive role in the RSS reclaiming the pivotal position. Golwalkar approved the draft, but the government had reservations about it. There was no specific rejection of violent means, and the constitution did not say anywhere that the RSS members believed in the Indian Constitution, and the symbols of the nation. The government also felt that the RSS was not democratically structured. There were specific complaints regarding the election of the *sarsanghchalak*. Letters were exchanged between Golwalkar and Patel, even as the secret negotiations with the Home Minister continued. Finally, Ranade, Deendayal Upadhyay a young pracharak who later played a crucial role in interpreting the ideology of the RSS and an emissary of Patel, re-drafted the constitution that was approved by Golwalkar. Finally the ban on the RSS was lifted on July 11, 1949 and furthermore it had achieved this without diluting either its ideological orientation or by altering its rigid organisational structure. This was a point

that was made by Golwalkar when after his release he remarked that the RSS "had given up nothing"<sup>70</sup> in getting the ban order rescinded.

After the rescinding of the ban, the RSS was keen to make a big show and for the next two months Golwalkar undertook an extensive tour of the country. Rallies were held everywhere that Golwalkar went and the size of the gatherings suggested that the RSS still retained some of its support base even though the network as a whole had collapsed in the 18 months of the ban. Nonetheless, much of the job of the RSS was being done by its supporters within the Congress and this was highlighted by a resolution of the Congress working committee adopted on October 7, 1949. The resolution, adopted in Nehru's absence stated that the RSS members could join the Congress as primary members, if they wished. There was a furore within the Congress and the ruling party, as members were still not convinced that the RSS had no role to play in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The Congress reversed its decision within a month ruling that RSS members could only become members of the Congress provided they resigned from the RSS. The concept of dual membership was not accepted by the Congress. The drama over the earlier decision of the CWC would be repeated again nearly thirty years later when the Janata Party split up on the question of dual membership.

This decision of the CWC however, isolated the RSS and the organisation had no option but to think of other ways of playing a more interventionist role in India. The RSS also took stock of the country, and concluded that in the last few turbulent years a large part of the 'motherland' had been 'lost' (the creation of Pakistan was projected as a loss for the motherland) and the RSS was unable to come to terms with it and wanted to reverse this process. With the Congress shutting its doors on the RSS, it had little option but to start exploring other options by which it could give a political edge to the RSS, and its ideology.

As a direct result, matters came to a head for the RSS leadership.

It was under attack from within for having failed to either foresee the partition of the country or the ban on the organisation. By the end of 1949, the RSS was treated like a pariah, and it found that its dream of playing an important role in shaping India's future after Independence had been shattered. There were also suggestion that the isolation of the RSS could be reversed if the organisation chose a political role, a view that was not shared by Golwalkar. There was also the added problem of the RSS network having collapsed during the ban. The organisation had to be rejuvenated, a new role had to be devised for the RSS as *swayamsevak*s were getting increasingly frustrated, by just participating in *shakhas* and the periodic ideological camps. There was a growing divide between the traditionalists within the RSS and those who wanted to experiment in the new political order. Finally, a compromise was thrashed out and it was decided that while the RSS would continue in its old role, it would "loan out" its workers for various activities, which could also involve direct politics.

### The Clan Surfaces

That was the time when the *sangh parivar* began to emerge as a large number of affiliates started taking shape. Over the next few years *pracharaks* were instrumental in forming various sectional organisations. While the formation of the political wing will be discussed in detail later, two other crucial affiliates that were given a definite character in this period were the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, to operate among workers and students respectively. A crucial role in the formative period of the BMS was played by Dattopant Thengadi, who is still the guiding personage of the trade union body. Another significant development of this period was the realisation by the RSS that the media had a major role to play. Thus, the *Organiser*, which had been started in 1947, a month after Mountbatten declared the intention of the colonial power to partition the subcontinent, was given a definite character and



new journals were launched not only in Hindi, but also in several other vernacular languages. Each of these journals is managed by an independent trust and even though the members of the boards are *swayamsevak*s and *pracharak*s, the RSS is actually in a position to formally claim that it has nothing to do with the journals. The situation is different from the periodicals published by the communist parties which are "official organs" of the parties. By the time India was declared a Republic in 1950, the 'sangh parivar' had started taking definite shape and had begun to recover from the setback of the ban. However, the true expanse of the RSS family started unveiling only a year later when the Jana Sangh was established.

Ironically, the spearhead of the Jana Sangh who, the person who was to be the guiding light of the party in its formative years was from outside the RSS fold. Not a member of the 'sangh parivar', Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the first president of the fledgling party, had been a former member of the Hindu Mahasabha, and a one-time political associate of Nehru. He had quit Independent India's first cabinet where he held the portfolios of Industry and Civil Supplies, because of Mookerjee's perception that Nehru was not taking a "hard line" against Pakistan, and was not very enthusiastic about integrating the Muslim majority Kashmir with the rest of India. Mookerjee resigned from the cabinet on April 8, 1950, the day the round of talks with Pakistan culminated in an agreement, and declared his intention of forming a new nationalist party. The RSS found an ally in him, and over the next few months, the details of the Jana Sangh were worked out between Mookerjee and the RSS leadership. The decision of the RSS to allow Mookerjee to be the leader of the new political formation, was an extension of Golwalkar's well-known view that the interests of the RSS would be best served if it could utilise either existing organisations, or well known leaders to propagate its viewpoint. This would save the RSS the additional trouble of projecting and building leaders with a mass

following. Mookerjee already had a mass following, and a tall stature. He did not have an organisation and this was provided by the RSS. There was true commonalty of purpose between Mookerjee and the RSS, and this led to the formation of the Jana Sangh in 1951.

It is also true though that both the RSS and Mookerjee had little option but to come closer and cobble together a new political party. The RSS had virtually no say in national matters after the decision of the Congress, to close its doors on the organisation. There was also the added pressure from the ranks to chalk out a new course of action. Golwalkar was opposed to transforming the RSS into a political front. There was also little question of associating with the Hindu Mahasabha, after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Finally, the RSS opted to form a political affiliate with the help of an eminent leader. What helped in the RSS accepting Mookerjee as the leader of the Jana Sangh, was his past association with Hindu politics and his view that Nehru was not adopting a strident enough posture against Pakistan and was not taking the requisite steps to integrate the Muslims in India with the rest of the population. Mookerjee had started his political career with the Congress in the 1920s, but left the party following differences with the approach of Gandhi. He was a member of the state assembly in Bengal as an independent candidate, and joined the Hindu Mahasabha in 1937 after the release of Savarkar. His stature in the party grew and he soon came to be known outside Bengal. When India attained Independence, Nehru requested him to join the cabinet because of his stature.

When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, he started distancing himself from the Hindu Mahasabha and argued that it should become a cultural organisation, and also allow non-Hindus to become its members. Two weeks after the assassination, the Hindu Mahasabha accepted Mookerjee's proposal and declared that it would concentrate on "our diverse social, cultural, and religious problems for the creation of a powerful and well-organised Hindu

society".<sup>71</sup> This was just a "tactical manoeuvre"<sup>72</sup> for the decision was reversed in August 1948 when the Mahasabha decided to "resume political activities".<sup>73</sup> The working committee of the Hindu Mahasabha that reversed the earlier decision however declared that the party would be open to non-Hindus, a resolution that was again reversed and non-Hindus were denied membership to the party. Mookerjee resigned from the Hindu Mahasabha, and later when relations between India and Pakistan started deteriorating, sided with Patel on the differences of opinion with Nehru. That was the time when the RSS began their informal discussions with him through some of its leaders, one of whom was Balraj Madhok, at that time a young pracharak from Jammu and one who would later play a controversial role in the Jana Sangh.<sup>74</sup>

However, even though Mookerjee left the Congress in April 1950, the Jana Sangh was not formed immediately. Both Golwalkar and Mookerjee were also closely monitoring the power struggle between Nehru and Patel in the Congress. Golwalkar had the old fascination for the Congress as a vehicle for the RSS ideology, and he sensed that if Patel emerged victorious within the Congress, the RSS would have a definite role in the scheme of things. Similarly, Mookerjee knew that he would be given a suitable position by Patel for the support extended to him in 1949 and 1950. By the beginning of 1951 it was becoming increasingly clear that Nehru was emerging victorious in the power struggle within the Congress. As a result, the RSS and Mookerjee redoubled the efforts to form the new party. In the ensuing discussions between Golwalkar and Mookerjee, the former stressed on two issues: the RSS should be structurally kept away from the new party; but the RSS view on nationalism should be incorporated into the ideological formation of the new party. Mookerjee agreed, but sensed a scepticism in Golwalkar's mind and started toying with the idea of forming the party without the support of the RSS. Nevertheless, differences were ironed out and in May 1951, a group of RSS members met at Jalandhar and announced the formation of the state unit of the Jana Sangh.

Soon units were set up in other states also and on October 21, 1951 the first national meeting of the Jana Sangh was held in Delhi. While the bulk of the cadre was drawn from the RSS, Mookerjee roped in some former Hindu Mahasabha and dissident Congressmen into the party fold. He gave a key assignment to Mauli Chandra Sharma who had been Patel's emissary when the RSS constitution was re-drafted. Another key figure at the first meeting was Bhai Mahavir, one of the pracharaks assigned by Golwalkar to the Jana Sangh he continued to be an influential 'elder' in the BJP in the 1980s. The meeting at Delhi also appointed a committee to prepare the manifesto for the impending general elections. The manifesto, released on October 29, 1950, was the blueprint of the new party and the basis of analysing the world view of the Jana Sangh when it was formed.

In its attempt to present itself as a nationalistic party, the Jana Sangh was critical of the development model opted for by Nehru. The Nehruvian model was chastised as an attempt to "make Bharat (an interesting aspect is the reference to India as Bharat and Bharatvarsh throughout the manifesto) a carbon-copy of the West".<sup>75</sup> The Congress was also charged with having "ignored and neglected the best in Bharatiya life and ideals".<sup>76</sup> The Bharatiya way of life is further elaborated in the manifesto as one "which has flown down from the Vedas in an unbroken continuity absorbing and assimilating contributions made by different people, creeds and cultures that came in touch with it in the course of history".<sup>77</sup> However, lest there are any feelings that the culture of the land is a mix of various traditions brought by migrating people from outside the subcontinent, the manifesto categorically stated that "Bharatiya culture is one and indivisible. Any talk of composite culture is unrealistic, illogical and dangerous for it tends to weaken national unity and encourages fissiparous tendencies".<sup>78</sup> The Jana Sangh's approach on Partition was also expanded prior to the rejection of composite culture: "The recent partition, instead of solving any prob-

lem, communal or otherwise, has given rise to many new ones. Culturally, economically, politically, as well as internationally, united India is essential".<sup>79</sup>

The Jana Sangh made a concerted attempt to demarcate it from the Congress, by highlighting the different perceptions of the two parties on the most emotive issue of that time: Partition. While the Congress was trying to convince the nation of the need to come to terms with the partitioning of the sub-continent, the Jana Sangh refused to accept the political reality and argued that India's problems would not be settled unless the process was reversed. In spite of its views on Partition, the Jana Sangh viewed the nation and Indian society as a singular one dominated by *Bharatiyata* which was markedly Hindu in character. The majority of Indians were Hindus and their world view made up the only stream, the traditions of other communities were not recognised by the Jana Sangh. At a political level, the most crucial question in the aftermath of Partition was communalism combined with the related issue of the nature of the secular state that India had opted for. The Jana Sangh was emphatic in its rejection of the Nehruvian approach to secularism by stating that "secularism as currently interpreted, is only an euphemism for the policy of Muslim appeasement. The so-called secular composite nationalism is neither nationalism nor secularism, but only a compromise with communalism of those who demand price even for their lip-loyalty to this country".<sup>80</sup> The last part of the argument makes it clear that at the time of its formation, the Jana Sangh was sceptical of scepticism about the patriotism of Indian Muslims, who had refused to make Islamic Pakistan their country. The Jana Sangh was clear that India had to be "rebuilt" and if the party got the chance it would do so on the "basis of *Bharatiya sanskriti* and *maryada*".<sup>81</sup>

After establishing itself as a Hindu nationalist party, the Jana Sangh manifesto promised the electorate specifically that India would pull out of the Commonwealth. It argued that "in view of the fact that Bharat has not in any way benefited by remaining

in the Commonwealth and because the United Kingdom has been pursuing a policy of partiality towards Pakistan, the whole question needs to be re-examined".<sup>82</sup> As far as Pakistan was concerned, the manifesto expressed that as "long as Pakistan remains a separate entity, the party will stand for a strict policy of reciprocity, and not one of appeasement".<sup>83</sup> The Jana Sangh also argued that the Congress government had been too soft towards Pakistan an argument that was an extension of the debate within the government. This led to Mookerjee's decision to part company with the Congress and form a separate Hindu nationalistic party. This aggressive posture was also evident in expressing the party's position on the tricky issue of Kashmir's integration in the country. The Jana Sangh demanded that the reference made to the United Nations be withdrawn, and "there should be no further question of plebiscite".<sup>84</sup> The manifesto outlined that the Jana Sangh was totally against giving any special status to Kashmir and that it should be "integrated with Bharat like other acceding states".<sup>85</sup>

The Jana Sangh was in favour of "economic and administrative decentralisation",<sup>86</sup> an approach that the later 'avatar' of the Jana Sangh felt was largely responsible for the growth of fissiparous tendencies. The Jana Sangh addressed itself primarily to the Hindi heartland in India by declaring that it would "work for the early adoption of Hindi as an all-India language,"<sup>87</sup> and the "adoption of 'Devanagari' script and a common technical terminology derived mainly from Sanskrit". Sanskrit was termed as the "repository of Bharatiya culture and the source and mainstay of all Indian languages".<sup>88</sup> Clearly, the Jana Sangh refused to accept Urdu, with Persian roots, as a language, that had a role to play in independent India. Furthermore, it also declared that it was in favour of a total ban on the slaughter of cows. Whether it was in relation to the question of culture, or language, the basis of Indian nationalism, according to the Jana Sangh, was solely Hindu. Other traditions could coexist, but only after accepting merging with the mainstream. The facade

projected by the Jana Sangh different from the Congress model, and in this it dismissed the legacy of colonialism. Whereas Nehru was modelling modern India along the lines Western liberalism, and the Jana Sangh considered this an anathema. However, they were as yet unclear regarding the nature of the alternative model. The Jana Sangh disagreed with Nehru's emphasis on the public sector arguing that it was in favour of the public sector only in the crucial defence sector. As for other industries, they argued that "state ownership has not worked efficiently and economically in this country. Unlimited state capitalism may also lead to totalitarianism".<sup>89</sup> The Jana Sangh, when it was floated, aimed at addressing itself directly to the people who felt that the sub-continent had been partitioned because the Muslims had been given too much political liberty. They argued that independent India would fail to prosper unless the Hindu-Muslim conflict was decisively settled in favour of the Hindus. The Jana Sangh's arguments were also aimed at those people who were nostalgic for the utopian golden ages and felt that the model of Western liberalism as opted for by India would not take it forward. They felt that to move ahead, India must return to the Hindu tradition stemming from the Vedas and other scriptures.

### Wide Off the Mark

As it transpired, the arguments and the approach of the Jana Sangh did not hold much water with the electorate in the general elections of 1952 as it gave a massive mandate to Nehru. The party only managed to win three of the 92 parliamentary seats contested and 35 of the 725 assembly seats. The Jana Sangh, however, received as much as 3.06 per cent of the poll in the parliamentary elections, a tally that ensured its recognition as a national party. Portentious indications of the Jana Sangh's future strongholds were also to be seen. In Delhi, the party had contested three of the four seats and its candidates secured a total 25.93 per cent of the votes cast. In Himachal Pradesh, they

garnered 13.66 per cent, a significant 7.29 per cent in Uttar Pradesh where it fielded candidates in 41 of the 86 constituencies. Its performance in Madhya Pradesh was also indicative of the future growth of the party in the state it received 5.92 per cent of the total votes cast. Of the three parliamentary seats that the Jana Sangh won, two were from West Bengal, and the remaining one was from Rajasthan. This was the only time that the Jana Sangh, or its later avatar managed to win a parliamentary seat from West Bengal but in 1952 the success of the party in the state stemmed primarily from Mookerjee's stature. In the simultaneous elections for the state assemblies, the Jana Sangh won 11 seats in Rajasthan, 9 in West Bengal, 6 in Madhya Pradesh and 5 in Delhi. The results of the 1952 elections would have a great bearing on the future of the sangh parivar because it undoubtedly showed that the RSS and its affiliates were still suffering from association with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The RSS was nowhere near the pivotal position it had held on the eve of Independence.

Nevertheless, the poor show in the general elections, did not affect Mookerjee. He was quick to start lobbying among various independently elected parliamentarians arguing that there was a need to form a joint opposition bloc in Parliament to prevent Nehru from having total sway. His efforts bore fruit when 32 members of Parliament joined hands with the Jana Sangh to form the National Democratic Front. These MPs were invited to the first annual session of the Jana Sangh held at Kanpur in December 1952. A significant appointment at this meeting was that of Deendayal Upadhyay, a young RSS pracharak who was "loaned to the Jana Sangh"<sup>90</sup> as its general secretary. This was the beginning of the RSS seizing control of the organisational machinery of the Jana Sangh as the other general secretary Mauli Chandra Sharma, was outside the RSS fold. At this meeting, the Jana Sangh also decided to opt for an agitational course on the Kashmir issue. Contacts were established with the regional Kashmiri party, Praja Parishad, also supported by the RSS. Mookerjee



established a national committee to campaign in favour of total integration of the state into India, and as a part of the agitation entered Kashmir on May 11, 1953. The government responded by promptly arresting him. Mookerjee died from a cardiac arrest in prison on June 23, 1953, and the Jana Sangh was quick to term his death as murder. Suddenly, the Jana Sangh was rudderless as the RSS had no leader of stature who could succeed Mookerjee as party president.

The Jana Sangh again had to look towards West Bengal to provide its leadership. N.C. Chatterjee, a close friend of Mookerjee was requested by the Jana Sangh, to fill the void he had left. Chatterjee was president of the Hindu Mahasabha and a member of the National Democratic Front in Parliament. Jana Sangh leaders both from the RSS fold and outside it met with Chatterjee and requested him to take over the Jana Sangh presidency. Unfortunately, Chatterjee had to seek the permission of the Hindu Mahasabha and Savarkar refused to grant permission as he was still incensed over the attitude of Golwalkar in the 1940s. Unable to rope in any political leader with a national stature, the Jana Sangh general council met at Allahabad in August 1953 and elected Mauli Chandra Sharma as the interim president. With Sharma's elevation the party organisation was placed in the hands of Upadhyay and with this the RSS came to have organisational control over the Jana Sangh for the first time since its inception. This control by the RSS over the political affiliates would remain till the merger of the Jana Sangh into the Janata Party. It would later resurface in the BJP after its decision to opt for the Jana Sangh legacy instead of JP's heritage.

Sharma was viewed with suspicion by the RSS cadre yet they had to accept him following their failure to locate a leader with a national stature to head the party. Operationally, the Jana Sangh was unable to resolve the differing styles of functioning between Upadhyay and Sharma and matters came to a head when Sharma rejected the former list of nominees to the party working committee preferring some of his allies. The clashes

continued within the party and by the time the general council of the Jana Sangh met in Indore in August 1954, it was clear that a parting of the ways between Sharma and the traditionalists within the party, was inevitable. The snowballing crisis reached a crisis point in November 1954 at the working committee meeting in Delhi. Sharma was expelled and a senior RSS leader, S.A. Sohoni, was appointed interim president. The *Organiser* mounted a scathing attack on Sharma, but the Jana Sangh was nowhere near locating a leader of national stature to head it. In December 1954, the plenary session of the party elected Prem Nath Dogra, an RSS pracharak and founder of the Praja Parishad in Kashmir as its president. This led to several members not in the RSS fold, parting company with the Jana Sangh, and forming a new party. However, in the elections in 1957, the splintered party fared even more miserably than the Jana Sangh who only managed negligible improvement by winning just four of the 130 parliamentary seats it contested, and 51 of the 606 assembly constituencies where it had fielded candidates.

The party organisation, now being managed by RSS traditionalists with Upadhyay spearheading it, was being run in a professional style, and this was making its impact felt. The party garnered a greater percentage of votes in 1957 than in 1952, and this trend continued in 1962 also when the Jana Sangh won 14 parliamentary seats, and 119 assembly constituencies. Its share of votes also rose from 5.93 per cent to 6.44 per cent between 1957 and 1962. But the RSS and its affiliates were however, nowhere near playing the kind of decisive role in shaping national policies, that it had wished for after Independence. Nehru was at the helm of affairs and the main threat to the Congress came from the Communist Party, which won the the state assembly elections in Kerala in 1957, and led to the formation of the first ever elected communist government.

With the deteriorating relations between India and China, the situation, began improving for the RSS and its affiliates. The communists found themselves on the defensive. The other opposition

parties joined forces against V.K. Krishna Menon, Nehru's Defence Minister, and managed to defeat him in a by-election from Bombay. A highpoint for the RSS, came in January 1963, when the organisation was invited to participate in the Republic Day celebrations. With patriotism a crucial issue in the aftermath of the Indo-China war of 1962, the situation was tailor-made for the RSS to project its ideology. Inclusion in the Republic Day parade accorded respectability to an organisation, still viewed with suspicion. The RSS brigade turned up in its uniform replete with the RSS band and this participation was publicised by the organisation all over the country. The political situation in India altered greatly between the 1962 general elections and the one held in 1967. Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, who had succeeded the former, had died and the Congress was led by Indira Gandhi and a conglomerate of traditional Congressmen, who thought that they could dictate terms to Indira Gandhi. The country had also seen two wars that had greatly hampered the economy. The Jana Sangh was at the forefront of the demand that India sever diplomatic ties with China, and should vote against its entry to the United Nations. The Jana Sangh also started preparing for the general elections well in advance by honing its organisation. Balraj Madhok, a RSS traditionalist, was appointed party president, an indication that the Jana Sangh was no longer pursuing the post-Mookerjee policy of figurehead presidents. Prior to this, the Jana Sangh at its 12th plenary session in Vijayawada in January 1965, adopted its policy resolutions. Upadhyay's concept of Integral Humanism had by then become the cornerstone of the Jana Sangh's ideology.

### **Imparting Hindu Image**

Between the years 1954 to 1967, the Jana Sangh had given a sharper edge to its Hindu nationalistic image. In an amendment to its manifesto of 1952, the party emphatically stated that the "Jana Sangh is not prepared to recognise English or Urdu as Indian languages. Furthermore, it would take every step to

remove Urdu from the list of languages recognised in the Constitution".<sup>91</sup> This was also the year when the concept of *Akhand Bharat* (undivided India) was first accepted by the Jana Sangh as its official policy. The new manifesto said: " 'Akhand Bharat' is an article of faith with the Jana Sangh. So long as Pakistan exists, instead of the policy of appeasement, the Jana Sangh would adopt a policy of reciprocity. It will press for the establishment of a modern democratic state in Pakistan and if any part of Pakistan wants to establish relations with Bharatvarsh, the Jana Sangh would welcome it".<sup>92</sup> The image of the Jana Sangh was given sharper teeth during the 1957 general elections. In the manifesto released that year, the Jana Sangh called for "compulsory military training for all young men,"<sup>93</sup> and also said that their party shall "prepare the country physically and psychologically for self-defence".<sup>94</sup> By 1957 it was clear that the Jana Sangh would continue with the perception of the RSS, namely that the enemy was not just in Pakistan, but also lay in the large sections of Muslims who had stayed back in India.

"Psychological" warfare thus was necessary and this would be done by "nationalising all non-Hindus by inculcating in them the ideal of Bharatiya culture."<sup>95</sup> Bharatiya culture has earlier been spelt out and it has little, or nothing in fact, that is non-Hindu in character. The manner of inculcating Bharatiya culture is indicated in the manifesto of 1962 next general elections, where it states the party would "evolve a new educational pattern which would blend our ancient Gurukul modes with modern methods."<sup>96</sup> However, the Jana Sangh was also quick to realise that Hindu society was itself not a singular one, with several schisms between various castes. The caste system in fact was recognised as an impediment to the growth of Hindu solidarity and the Jana Sangh pledged that it would strive to create a "feeling of equality and oneness in Hindu society by liquidating untouchability and casteism". The realisation that Hindus can not be moulded into a composite political group while caste divisions still exist, has been assessed by the RSS and its affiliates

time and again and proved correct. in the early 1990s, when attempts to make job reservations on the basis of caste led to major ruptures in Hindu society, and almost upset the apple cart of the advocates of the Hindutva idea.

The charges against the Congress government in 1967 were fairly predictable: "Both communist China and Pakistan are in illegal occupation of large areas of Indian territory. The Congress government has never cared to free them."<sup>97</sup> Defence was considered a priority area and the Jana Sangh called for a change in the defence and foreign policies. It promised that the party would:

- 1) increase the strength of the services,
- 2) constitute a "vast territorial army,"
- 3) introduce military training in all colleges for two years, and
- 4) develop defence industries.<sup>98</sup>

However, the most significant of the promises was the resolve to "manufacture nuclear weapons and missiles".<sup>99</sup> The Jana Sangh also declared that every citizen of the country should have the right to carry arms.

The manifesto of 1967 also proposed that "there are forces in the country which are working as fifth columnists of the enemies. They should be put down with a firm hand. The Jana Sangh will enact a law of treason".<sup>100</sup> The party also claimed that the "present Constitution does not manifest the country's basic unity,"<sup>101</sup> and that the party shall amend it "and declare India a Unitary State." A Uniform Civil Code would be enacted and the Jana Sangh's vision of India became more rigid with the declaration that "restriction would be imposed on the activities of foreign missionaries". The 1967 manifesto was the most comprehensive one since the party's inception and it dwelt at great length on economic issues, besides promising that "swadeshi and self-reliance" shall be the guiding principles of the economic approach of the Jana Sangh. The Jana Sangh projected itself as an alternative to the Congress as it was a party that had "sound principles, clear policies, a definite programme, roots deep in the

soil, and a country-wide organisation which has a cadre of devoted, selfless and disciplined workers".<sup>102</sup>

Besides the issues raised by the two wars, corruption, factionalism and economic problems, were the key issues in 1967. The ruling party was fractured as Indira Gandhi was yet to come into her own, and the emerging syndicate was keen to control her actions and decisions. The strength of the Congress in the Lok Sabha was reduced dramatically, while the Jana Sangh performance bettered the expectation of even party leaders. Its strength in Parliament grew from 14 to 35 and the number of assembly seats increased to 261 from 119 in the last hustings. The percentage of votes also increased correspondingly 9.44 per cent in the parliamentary and 8.80 in the assembly elections. The Jana Sangh's biggest success was in Delhi where it emerged as the majority party in the elections for the two local bodies, bagging 52 of the 100 MCD seats and 33 of the 56 Metropolitan Council seats.

The Jana Sangh was quick to assess the new political scenario in the country where the Congress did not have a majority in several states for the first time since Independence. The Jana Sangh joined the united front governments in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab. The RSS agreed with the decision because it felt that the coalition government might result in "mutual harmony among various political parties as envisaged by the 'sangh.'" However, this decision posed internal problems for the party, as Balraj Madhok argued that the party had committed a serious mistake by joining a government that had communists as a coalition partner. He also managed to get the support of Golwalkar, but the majority view prevailed, as several members of the party sensed the benefits of being in power for the first time in their political careers. Atal Behari Vajpayee, who had been one of the national secretaries since 1955 and was the leader of the Jana Sangh parliamentary party, emerged as a significant "voice of the left" within the party, and he argued in favour of tactical decisions like joining

the coalition governments. Even though Upadhyay was generally suspicious of the communists, he fell in line with Vajpayee's argument, primarily because he agreed principally with the tactical alliance argument and also because he sensed the charismatic appeal of Vajpayee a fact that Upadhyay could not ignore as the Jana Sangh had not been able to project any leader of national stature, since the death of Mookerjee.

What followed was a virtual repeat of the factional clashes witnessed during 1954-1955. Madhok was opposed to the tactical line and did not hide his disenchantment at the "leftward turn" of the Jana Sangh. Matters came to a head in late 1967, when he indicated that he wanted to run for presidency of the party. Even the core group felt that Upadhyay should move to that position as the party organisation had consolidated its base, and many felt that the party should prepare itself for a protracted power struggle which could be successfully managed only if there was ideological and personal cohesion at the top of the party hierarchy. A marginalised Madhok started working in tandem with several leaders of the right wing Swatantra Party and even filed a petition in the Supreme Court against Indira Gandhi's populist decision to nationalise banks. Unlike the differences within the Jana Sangh in the 1950s, the crisis in the late 1960s was more acute as all contenders were from the RSS fold. This also raised the spectre of a vertical split right through the entire sangh parivar, was averted by a series of manoeuvres by the top RSS leadership.

Meanwhile a fresh crisis gripped the Jana Sangh in February 1968 when Upadhyay was found dead in a train in Mughal Sarai, a major railway junction in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The Jana Sangh alleged that it was a case of political murder. The sympathy wave among the cadre helped Vajpayee emerge as the political heir of Upadhyay, and he was elevated to the position of party president. By the end of the 1960s it appeared that Indira Gandhi was planning for mid-term elections following the split in the Congress. Negotiations began for forming a political alliance to defeat

Indira Gandhi. However, differences again arose within the Jana Sangh when Madhok argued in favour of a merger with other conservative parties, while Vajpayee and others were in favour of an electoral alliance. Discussions continued for long, and finally on January 25, 1971 leaders of the Jana Sangh, Congress(O), Swatantra Party and the Samyukta Socialist Party announced the formation of a "grand alliance". There was little ideological similarity in these four parties. What united them was there fervent wish to defeat Indira Gandhi.

However, the Jana Sangh did not benefit from the "grand alliance" as its share of votes went down from 9.41 per cent in 1967 to 7.35 per cent in 1971. The number of its parliamentary seats also slipped from 35 to 22. Indira Gandhi was voted to power with a comfortable majority as she gained in stature following the war with Pakistan and the liberation of Bangladesh. There was sharp criticism of the leadership at the general council meeting of the Jana Sangh in Jaipur, but this did not halt the downward slide of the party. The cadres felt that the leadership had erred by depending heavily on unreliable electoral allies. With Indira Gandhi's political ascent there was little that the Jana Sangh leadership could do to stall Congress victory in the assembly elections in 16 states, and two Union territories in 1972. The Jana Sangh suffered electoral reverses, most notable being in Delhi where it lost majority in the local bodies.

The elections of 1971 and 1972 are significant because for the first time the Jana Sangh coined a word that would in the 1980s and 1990s, become a key 'concept' for the advocates of the Hindutva idea. The word 'pseudo-secularism',<sup>103</sup> has been used with increasing frequency by BJP leaders since the late 1980s whenever it argued that the temple agitation was not restricted to building a Ram temple at Ayodhya, but was a "part of a wider struggle against the forces of pseudo-secularism". In the election manifesto of 1971, the Jana Sangh declared that the party "fully subscribes to the ancient ideal of the non-communal state".<sup>104</sup> However, the party was prompt in adding that it "rejects the



pseudo-secularism that combines irreligion with appeasement. We would like followers of all religions to accept the Indian ideal of *sarvadharmasambhava*".<sup>105</sup> By the early 1970s it became clear that the Jana Sangh had not diluted the approach of the RSS that India was primarily Hindu in character and that people professing other religions were welcome to stay in the country provided they accepted and merged with the Hindu traditions. This position of the Jana Sangh, viewed in the context of a resolution on education adopted by the party in 1960, at the VIII All India Session of the party, provides an explanation to the BJP decision in 1991 to alter the curriculum in the schools in the four states governed by the party. The resolution stated that "to give moral and national content to education, the curricula and the courses of study should be so recast that they help the students to obtain a comprehensive grounding in our national heritage, culture and values of life together with a healthy understanding and respect for the great national heroes in all walks of life".<sup>106</sup>

The Jana Sangh continued with its policy of the late 1960s, of giving a populist edge to its policies and programmes. The leadership was conscious of the criticism by its cadre that the Jana Sangh was being perceived as a party of the rich, because of its association with extreme rightist parties like the Swatantra Party. At a crucial party session in Bhagalpur in 1972, the Jana Sangh decided to concentrate on building new bases among the landless labour, lower castes, industrial workers and students. The populist thrust continued for the next few months and it was given a new direction in January 1973, when the plenary session of the party was held in Kanpur.

At this meeting Vajpayee was replaced by Lal Krishna Advani, a former RSS pracharak who had migrated from Sindh during Partition. Advani had made his mark during his tenure as Speaker of the Delhi Metropolitan Council. Several front organisations of the Jana Sangh also scheduled their meeting at the same time and one of the first decisions that Advani took as president was to resolve the long-simmering dispute between

Madhok and the rest of the party leadership. He despatched a letter to Madhok detailing the instances when he had publicly differed with the party policy, and asked him to apologise to the leadership. Madhok contended that the dispute should be referred to Golwalkar, but Advani argued that there was no need to refer the matter to the RSS brass, because they would "emphasise the importance of discipline and collective functioning". Madhok was expelled and he charged that the Jana Sangh was being dominated by the RSS and that he had been victimised because he did not want leaders based in Nagpur to have total control on the party. Madhok went on to form another party which failed to make much headway, and accused the Jana Sangh of being influenced by communists. He highlighted Vajpayee's association with the communist movement early in his political career, he had been a member of the All India Students' Federation, an affiliate of the Communist Party of India.

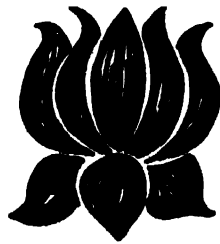
Parting of ways with Madhok did not deter the Jana Sangh from pursuing populist policies, especially since the Indian electorate's euphoria with Indira Gandhi appeared to be evaporating as prices of essential commodities escalated. By late 1973, there were indications of a protest movement when Jai Prakash Narain started his campaign for "total revolution". The RSS was quick to seize the potential of the movement and decided to control the direction of the agitation, by positioning some of its key leaders in pivotal positions. This was also the time when Balasaheb Deoras, general secretary of the RSS since the mid-1960s, was appointed *sarsanghchalak* after the death of Golwalkar. Deoras preferred a more activist role for the RSS and its affiliates than his predecessor. This was evident in the fact that a large number of *swayamsevak*s also played an active role in the formative period of the agitation, which finally forced Indira Gandhi to declare Internal Emergency in June 1975. In fact, the majority of activists in JP's campaign were drawn from the student affiliate of the RSS, the ABVP. By late 1974, the Jana

Sangh had worked in tandem with three other opposition parties Samyukta Socialist Party, Congress (O), and Bharatiya Lok Dal to form the National Coordination Committee to assist JP's movement. Shortly thereafter, Deoras spoke in laudatory terms about JP at a public meeting in Delhi. In return, JP complimented the RSS and also asserted that the Jana Sangh was not a fascist organisation.

In spite of the setbacks in the elections of 1971 and 1972, the Jana Sangh did not abandon the policy of forging a united front against Indira Gandhi. The events of 1975 were dramatic: Mrs Gandhi's election to Parliament was declared null and void by the High Court of Allahabad, and even as JP and other opposition leaders mounted an attack on her, Internal Emergency was declared. Several opposition leaders were arrested and the RSS was banned because of its active assistance to JP's agitation. Deoras was arrested on June 30, 1975 but this time the RSS was not isolated like in 1948, and had formed a close working relationship with other opposition parties. Even as the government launched the crackdown on the RSS, its members openly associated with the opposition front, and throughout the Emergency, remained active through underground networking. RSS activists met each other throughout the Emergency, by organising prayer meetings and holding sporting events. When the Emergency was lifted, the RSS gave all out support to the Janata Front, formed by the opposition parties, and in the elections, ensured the defeat of Indira Gandhi. Unlike the earlier occasions, the RSS emerged stronger after the second ban on its activities. When the Janata government was sworn in, the RSS had for the first time a Union government that was indebted to it and one of its affiliates was a partner in the government.

By the time the dual membership issue came out in the open and caused fissures in the ranks of the Janata Party, the RSS had consolidated its gains and, as earlier mentioned, had sidestepped politics and begun working through other affiliates, most notably the VHP. The process of consolidation continued throughout the

early 1980s even as the newly formed BJP stumbled. The RSS had gained respectability — by associating with the opposition parties in their agitation against Indira Gandhi and it was not keen to lose this new found respectability which is why when the dual membership issue rocked the Janata government, it assiduously refrained from getting embroiled in the dispute. However, the BJP was to realise its folly of trying to project the legacy of JP after its humiliating defeat in the 1984 elections. By 1986, however, issues had been resolved and the BJP returned within the 'family fold' and this was best underlined by the appointment of Advani as president in place of Vajpayee. After this it was simply a matter of time and a question of astute moves on the part of the the RSS and its affiliates, before it would come to have a stranglehold on Indian polity. There was also the added advantage of other political forces underestimating the RSS clan, and forming political alliances with the BJP to give it greater political credibility.



## CHAPTER 5

# Nyāyakāṇḍ



*"How will you justify yourself?  
You struck me from behind  
Like a snake a sleeping man  
And you are the earth's protector!  
You can no more protect the earth".*

**Vali to Ram after being shot by him in the  
Ramayan's Kishkindakand**

**I**t was a motley group that assembled in the famed Constitution Club in the capital city of Delhi in the first week of July, 1993. They were academicians, lawyers, human rights activists, and many others from diverse fields. But most importantly, there were several people from Ayodhya. They were both Hindus and Muslims, and some of them were 'servants of God'. These people had come from the temple-town to depose before the Citizens' Tribunal on Ayodhya.<sup>1</sup> The Tribunal heard the witnesses and other experts after having perused the report presented to it by the Commission of Inquiry, headed by a retired former chief secretary of the government of the state of Bihar. The Commission was appointed by three judges Justice O. Chinappa Reddy, Justice D.A. Desai, and Justice D.S. Tewatia, all of whom had retired from the Supreme and High Courts some years ago. The Citizens' Tribunal had been formed in February 1993 by several non-governmental organisations. The independent body declared on its formation that it would "extend its scope of investigation and evaluation, beyond that of existing government appointed commissions," established by the Union

government after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The Tribunal noted that India had been "born out of a partition" and though this had been accompanied by the worst communal conflicts ever witnessed in the country, the "Indian nation state resisted all pressures to turn itself into a majority-ruled 'Hindu Rashtra' and opened its doors to members of all religious faiths and ideologies". However, the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the events in its aftermath had "posed certain serious questions" regarding the issue of whether "democratic rights and secular beliefs guaranteed by the Constitution," were now being threatened in India. The Tribunal also stated that it wanted to find out if some political forces were "subverting the spirit of federalism of our Constitution, by abusing the rights granted to the states under the Seventh Schedule, as evident from the role of the state government of Uttar Pradesh" during the developments in Ayodhya.

The Tribunal framed its terms of reference, and declared that it would determine the extent to which the democratic and secular foundations of India had been violated by the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the events preceding and following it. The Tribunal also decided to identify the "perpetrators of this violation" and make positive suggestions, which would aid in restoring the secular and democratic values. The Tribunal also stated that it would attempt to find out the "ways and means by which the institutions of the State and society, will prevent such violations in future".

Though the Tribunal had no legal status and its verdict would not be binding on either those found guilty or any of the State institutions, it was nonetheless of considerable importance because of its status as a parallel judicial body. Tribunals have had a long tradition in India. One of the earliest being the tribunal formed at the initiative of Mahatma Gandhi, to probe the firing led by General Dyer of the British army, on the peaceful crowd in Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. In the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a Tribunal was also set up in Bombay



by some non-governmental organisations, to investigate the nature of rioting in the city in January. While previous tribunals delivered significant verdicts, the Tribunal on Ayodhya was of greater significance. This was the first judicial attempt, albeit independent, and without government sanction, to speedily hear the grievances of the Muslims of Ayodhya and those other sections of society, that had been wronged by the advocates of the Hindutva idea. Through its partisan methods, and by refusing to take a categorical position on the Ayodhya dispute, the judiciary had been as much responsible as other wings of the State machinery, for prolonging the Ayodhya dispute. The controversy surrounding the mosque-temple dispute, highlighted "how the courts have been used to further narrow communal interests".

The "delay in the judicial process" contributed to the communalisation of Indian polity. The formation of the Citizens' Tribunal was the first positive development for the residents of Ayodhya as they had witnessed the protracted legal imbroglio. What added to the historical significance of the Tribunal's hearing was the fact that it was not reduced to a distanced legal probe, but the three judges heard a plethora of views, and evaluated the evidence that had been presented before it by the Commission of Inquiry and the testimonies of other witnesses. The judgment of the Tribunal, though not having any legal sanction, has significant historical importance, eventually when the epitaph of Nehruvian India is written the Tribunal's verdict will come in handy for analysing the turbulent decades of 1980s and 1990s.

The witnesses that deposed before the Tribunal were a mixed lot. They included people from Ayodhya who testified that "even after the imposition of Presidents' Rule on the evening of December 6, 1992 evening, Muslim residents were physically assaulted, many brutally murdered, and their houses looted". The witnesses were not just Muslims but also included Hindus including the editor of a local weekly. Lal Das, the Hindu priest who used

to manage the affairs inside the Babri Masjid till the BJP government dismissed him, testified that the idols which had been installed were first removed from the shrine under attack, and later they "disappeared altogether". The witnesses from Ayodhya said that there were two categories of kar sevaks one group which demolished the Babri Masjid and the other which led attacks on the Muslims of Ayodhya. Journalists who reported the demolition of the mosque also deposed before the Tribunal and claimed that the action was premeditated. The journalists gave "detailed accounts of preparatory activities and high level meetings" that took place among leaders of the RSS clan before the demolition. Another deposition, which contradicted the position adopted by the BJP, was that of the editor of a Faizabad-based daily newspaper. The editor stated that a telephone operator had partially heard the conversation between L.K. Advani and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Kalyan Singh on December 6 around 2.30 p.m. The witness stated that during the conversation Advani was asked whether the Chief Minister should resign. The reply of the BJP leader was: "No, not till the demolition is completed". While the report of the Commission of Inquiry, and the depositions of the witnesses from Ayodhya and other eye witnesses to the demolition, tried to prove that the demolition was a premeditated act and that the Union government and other wings of the state machinery failed in their job to protect the shrine, the testimonies of some expert witnesses highlighted the broader issues that have surfaced in the course of the Ayodhya agitation.

Two scholars deposed before the Tribunal about how the RSS clan was "trying to communalise the Dalit community," and that it was doing so by using "false rumours to mobilise Dalits against Muslims" and were seeking to "win over Dalits by trying to incorporate Ambedkar as a Hindu reformer, ignoring his disillusionment with Hinduism and the caste system". The scholars also deposed that the state government of Maharashtra, had not in discharged its constitutional obligations by failing to arrest

Bal Thackeray and prevent the activities of the Shiv Sena. Another eminent political scientist who had been in the forefront of a section of the Muslim intelligentsia, who wanted to articulate a separate voice for the community as distinct from the assertions of Muslim politicians, deposed before the Tribunal on how the RSS clan was "damaging Hinduism with its plural traditions". He also contended that the Muslims who had started emerging from its earlier position of isolation had been once again "pushed back into a frightened isolation" by the events leading to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Another scholar, a Christian theological expert, told the Tribunal that the events of December 6 had shaken the faith of the people of India in the secular bonafides of the State. There were two other scholars who deposed that the RSS clan had started communalising children through the children's magazines, and other activities like quiz competitions. They stated that the communalisation of the children was being done through a network of schools managed by the RSS clan. History text books that were changed by the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh also came in for evaluation in the deposition. In one of the books "one page dealing with Gandhiji's life and work during the national movement" had been taken out and replaced with "two pages on Hedgewar's 'contribution in the National Movement'".

The Tribunal before initiating the hearing sent missives to the leaders of the RSS clan and the Union government officials, holding them guilty for the demolition of the Babri Masjid and communalising Indian polity. However, barring the general secretary of the RSS and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the students wing of the RSS, none of the others charged with the action in Ayodhya bothered to respond. Even the two who replied, questioned the status of the Tribunal and stated that the exercise was "anti-RSS," saying that the organisation did not feel it "either important or necessary to respond" to the letter of the Tribunal, as they did not "recognise the so-called" Tribunal. Even though the hearing of the Tribunal was little beyond an *ex parte*

hearing, it did not reduce the historical significance of the initiative especially at a time when the Union government's official Commission of Inquiry had made little headway, and the report appeared to be doomed to gather dust like numerous other government reports. The Supreme Court continued to prevaricate on the sensitive issue, and there was no speedy response to the Union government's decision to seek a judicial opinion on the limited fact about whether there had been a pre-existing Hindu structure, over which the Babri Masjid had been built. In many ways, the lack of urgency exhibited by the judiciary even after the demolition of the mosque, is reminiscent of the casual manner in which the legal dispute has been treated for nearly four decades.

However, the judiciary had moved promptly when a mob of local Hindus entered the Babri Masjid, and installed the idols on the night of December 22-23, 1949. The action of the mob had violated Sections 295 and 297 of the Indian Penal Code that dealt with "injuring or defiling a place of worship," and "trespassing on burial grounds". Instead of immediately removing the idols, the local administration sought the protection of the volatile situation, and also succeeded in enlisting the support of Markanday Singh, the Additional City Magistrate in Faizabad. He contended that since there was a long-standing dispute between the Hindus and Muslims "over the question of rights of proprietorship and worship in the building," there was a possibility of a clash between the two communities. The magistrate thus decreed that the disputed property be attached under Section 145 of the Criminal Procedure Code. The order was passed on December 29, 1949 barely a week after the idols were installed, and the Chairman of the Municipal Board of Ayodhya was also appointed as the Receiver. The Magistrate ruled that the gate of the mosque be locked, though the Receiver and a priest appointed by him could enter the mosque to offer prayers to the idols at the specified hours. Hindus were prevented entry to the

mosque, but could offer obeisance from outside the iron grilled gate. The Muslims were also directed not to come near the precincts of the Babri Masjid. This order continued till February 1986 when the District Judge of Faizabad ordered the opening of the lock and allowed the Hindus the right to enter the mosque and offer prayers to the idols. In the interim 27 years, a plethora of cases were filed and there were several orders. However, none of them helped to resolve the dispute and what was essentially a civil case pertaining to the ownership of a certain property, slowly became caught in a political quagmire from which the Muslims neither found a way out, nor did they succeed in getting back a property that belonged to them.

The case in 1949 was a simple one of dispossession. The Babri Masjid was in the control of the Muslims and they legally owned the property. Following the Partition, when Muslims came under attack in the twin towns also, the old dispute regarding the mosque was raked up again by the local Hindus after a concerted campaign. Just the way the police had refused to act when the graveyard in front of the Babri Masjid was dug up in the weeks preceding the demolition, the local administration connived to ensure that the idols were not taken out, and religious sanctity was given to the act by allowing continuous *puja* and *bhog* inside the mosque. There is ambiguity about whether the judiciary also wilfully played a part in this act of dispossessing the Muslims of the Babri Masjid.

The action was given more legal protection in 1986 when the Hindu devotees were allowed unrestricted entry inside the shrine. However, the Muslims continued to have faith in the Indian system and continued to agitate for the restoration of the mosque with the hope that what had been legally and historically theirs would be returned to them. However, this never happened with the events of December 6, 1992 effectively sealing their fate. The legal dispute over the Babri Masjid had been heard in the entire range of courts, yet the Muslims were never given possession of the property, making it one of the most peculiar cases in

the legal history of India. Ironically, the key role in this blatant act of dispossession was played by the state machinery and the judiciary.

If the judiciary cooperated with the local administration in 1949 to dispossess the Muslims of the Babri Masjid, the first government in independent India did little to reverse the process initiated at the behest of District Magistrate K.K. Nayar. The bureaucrat, who later quit service, joined the Jana Sangh and eventually became an MP, was recognised for his "services to the cause of the Ram temple," and his portrait was prominently displayed on a wall inside the Babri Masjid till it existed. Jawaharlal Nehru though distressed at the turn of events in Ayodhya, could do little to return the disputed mosque to the Muslims. Akshay Brahmachari, the local secretary of the Congress, was the only one to register a string of protests. He shot off a series of missives to senior party leaders, including one to Lal Bahadur Shastri, a Minister in the state government of Uttar Pradesh who later became Prime Minister after the death of Nehru. In the memorandum, the local Congress leader asserted that he was not viewing the attack on Muslim property and the act of dispossessing the Muslims of the Babri Masjid, as an issue restricted to the question of "saving the mosque or Muslims. I view it as saving the great ideals of the Congress and Mahatma Gandhi for which we have been struggling all these days. If we do not restrict these ideas with all the force in our command, the ideals of the Congress will become extinct, and reactionary forces will sweep the country". Akshay Brahmachari's warning turned out to be fairly prophetic. But, his memorandum and two fasts did not stir the Congress party into action. Meanwhile, he quit the Congress and after contesting in the state assembly elections against Govind Ballabh Pant, the Congress Chief Minister, turned a recluse and retired to his small ashram on the outskirts of Lucknow. Shortly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Akshay Brahmachari said that the "time had finally come when the Congress ideology had become extinct, and India was at the

point of being overrun by reactionary forces”.

If the directive of both Nehru and his Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh failed to remove the idols and restore the mosque to the Muslims, the pitch in Ayodhya was further queered by two actions. Firstly, the District Magistrate informed the state government that he could not comply with their order of returning the Babri Masjid to the status before the installation of the idols, because he “feared bloodshed and manslaughter and suffering to many innocent lives”. The second move was made by a Ayodhya-based Hindu priest, Gopal Singh Visharad, on January 16, 1950 Visharad filed a case in the court of the Civil Judge of Faizabad and pleaded before the judge. N.N. Chadha, that he be allowed to “worship and visit without obstruction and disturbance” the idols kept inside the mosque. He also pleaded for a permanent injunction against any move to remove the idols. While disallowing Visharad the right to offer prayers, the judge, however, passed an interim order on the same which ruled that the idols could not be removed and *puja* should not be interfered with. In his petition, Visharad named eight defendants which included the State of Uttar Pradesh, the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police of Faizabad, and five local Muslim residents. Three days later, the judge on an application by one of the defendants, clarified that the injunction against the removal of the idols and continuation of *puja* had been delivered because what was going on inside the Babri Masjid was only “limited *puja*”. In less than a month after the idols were forcibly installed inside the Babri Masjid by a raging mob, the judiciary and the local administration had ensured that the act was legitimised and *puja* was allowed without hindrance, even as Muslims were no longer permitted to enter the mosque that was legally theirs till the night of December 22-23, 1949.

Though *puja* continued inside the mosque, the court exhibited no urgency to dispose of the case filed by Visharad. It also chose not to modify its interim injunction even though the Deputy

Commissioner in his written submission before the court in April 1950, made three significant points that revealed the factual situation in Ayodhya. The three points were:

- a) The property under dispute was "known as Babri Masjid" and had been used as a mosque for a long time by the Muslims;
- b) On the night of December 22-23, 1949 the idols were "wrongly and surreptitiously put inside it"; and
- c) The incident had led to making the situation in Ayodhya tense and the state authorities had to intervene in order to ensure that peace was not disturbed.

It could be argued that after the categorical position taken by Deputy Commissioner, the judge was logically expected to vacate his interim injunction and summon the local officials to hear their version regarding why the idols should not be removed from the mosque. However, this was not done by the judge, confirming the view that the judiciary was an active participant in the plan to permanently dispossess the Muslims of the Babri Masjid.

By the end of 1950, it was clear that the Muslims of Ayodhya would find it tough to get the mosque restored to them. The mosque was also seen by the Hindu priests as a potential avenue to riches as pilgrims would flock to the mosque if it was thrown open to them. In December, another Hindu priest laid claim to the mosque. Ram Chandra Paramhans, who would three decades later emerge as one of the significant religious leaders on the VHP platform, was the leader of a militant sect of Hinduism the Digambar Akhara. He made a plea similar to the one by Visharad, and the judge responded by consolidating the two suits in February 1951, once again without vacating his interim injunction. The judge clarified his stand by pointing out that it was an "undisputed fact that on the day of this suit the idols of Shri Bhagwan Ram Chandra and others did exist on the site and worship was performed by Hindus". However, the judge did not allow the the Muslim defendants and the State to present their arguments.



The spate of legal cases that followed the installation of the idols had been preceded by another case filed way back in 1885 by Mahant Raghubar Das, a Hindu priest. The priest had pleaded that as he was the mahant of the Ram Chabutra, and that he be allowed to build a temple at the site. However, the sub-judge of Faizabad who heard the case, dismissed the petition arguing that a temple so close to the mosque, would pose a constant threat to peace in Ayodhya. The case was dismissed but not before the judge gave further sanction to folklore as he noted in his verdict that it was unfortunate that the Muslims had built a mosque at Ram's birthplace. It is ironic that when the dispute over the Babri Masjid came to receive national attention in the mid 1980s, one of the first blueprints of a compromise settlement endorsed by Syed Shahabuddin suggested that the temple be allowed to be built over the Ram Chabutra, that the Muslims could enter the mosque from the northern gate and that the iron grilled fence could be replaced by a brick wall.

Long before the dispute in Ayodhya came to have a frontal position in the political theatre of India, a solution had surfaced before the judiciary, but in 1885, it failed to foresee the shape of things to emerge, over the next several decades and chose not to settle the dispute once and for all. It is a matter of historical conjecture as to what would have happened if the Faizabad sub-judge had permitted the Mahant of the Ram Chabutra to build a temple adjacent to the Babri Masjid. However, given the situation prevailing in Mathura where the mosque continued to exist adjacent to the Krishna temple without jeopardising peace in the city till the advocates of the Hindutva idea demanded the demolition of the Mathura mosque, probably would not be wrong to assume that the dispute would have been permanently settled. With the new temple being built in the nineteenth century, the people of Ayodhya would have come to terms with the twin shrines and the nation could have been saved a great deal of trouble and discord.

The partisan nature of the judiciary continued to be visible

*throughout the 1950s. This was visible not just in the local courts of Faizabad, but also in the higher courts. In 1955, an appeal was filed in the Division Bench of the Allahabad High Court, against the interim injunction of the Faizabad judge. It was turned down by the court, but it did note that the lower court had erred by placing so much faith in the affidavits filed by some local residents of Ayodhya, who claimed that the Babri Masjid had not been used as a mosque from 1936. The judges also said that it would be "desirable that a suit of this kind be decided as soon as possible, and it is regretted that it remained undecided after four years". Another four years went by, and the Faizabad court was yet to come out with the verdict when another group of Hindu priests laid claim to the Babri Masjid. The suit filed by Mahant Raghunath of the Nirmohi Akhara, besides making a plea in a fashion akin to that of the earlier two cases, also demanded that the receiver appointed by the criminal court be dismissed and the property handed over to the plaintiff. The third case was also consolidated with the existing two. In the meanwhile, the criminal case filed under Section 145 of the CrPC that was filed while attaching, meaning taking it under judicial control, the Babri Masjid, was consigned to the records as it was felt that the verdict of the Civil Court, would have a binding effect on the Criminal Court.*

In the cases that were continuing in the local Faizabad courts, the Muslims continued to be mere defendants and there was no move on their part to join the legal wrangling as a plaintiff. This had primarily to do with the "disarray among the Muslims of Ayodhya following the attacks on them after Partition". However, in December 1961, the Muslims too joined the legal fray when the Sunni Central Board of Waqfs and some others filed a suit and pleaded that the the court should make a declaration to the "effect that the property indicated by the letters A B C D in the sketch map attached to the plaint is a public mosque commonly known as the Babri Masjid and that the land adjoining the mosque shown in the sketch map by letter E F G H is a public

Muslim graveyard". The petitioners also pleaded that the court should order the "removal of idols and other articles". Little progress however, was made in either of the cases till January 1964 when the civil judge of Faizabad consolidated the case filed by the Muslim organisations and individuals with the other three cases filed by Hindu priests. The last case was named as the leading case and the suit came to be referred as the title suit. By the mid 1960s, the legal dispute over the Babri Masjid had essentially become a civil dispute involving the legal ownership of a disputed property. Like other civil suits, this case also dragged on endlessly even as the interim injunction remained operative. The Muslims of Ayodhya thus remained dispossessed of their mosque and the idols remained inside, where *puja* was offered by a priest appointed by the Receiver.

With the title suit going into a virtual legal tailspin, another bizarre controversy began following the death of Priya Dutt Ram, the Receiver of the Babri Masjid, in August 1970. This led to a spate of applications as the civil judge was urged that the new Receiver should be appointed by it, and not by a criminal court. Throughout the 1970s, the legal dispute surrounding the Receiver took precedence over resolving the title suit. This matter was brought up even in the High Court, leading to the records of the title suit being "summoned by the High Court and accordingly no proceedings took place in the suits at Faizabad". The dispute surrounding the Receiver was finally settled by the High Court only in August 1987, 17 years after the first legal intervention was made in 1970, and the High Court directed that the "records of the four civil suits be placed before the District Judge who will transfer the suits to an Additional District Judge who is not expected to be transferred from Faizabad for approximately 18 months thereafter, and will try to dispose of the suits as early as possible".

If the installation of the idols was the first step in dispossessing the Muslim of the Babri Masjid, the next step was taken in February 1986 when K.M. Pandey, a high-caste Hindu district

judge of Faizabad, ruled that the lock on the gate separating the mosque from the Ram Chabutra, should be opened and the shrine be thrown open to the Hindu devotees. The order was issued in the backdrop of the consistent campaign launched by the VHP since 1984 and was based on a petition filed by Umesh Chandra Pandey, a young lawyer from Faizabad. There were allegations that the decision of the district judge was motivated by Arun Nehru, the Union Minister for Internal Security in the government headed by Rajiv Gandhi, but they have not been substantiated. However, the hasty manner in which the verdict was delivered suggests that the judiciary had once again been influenced by other considerations and directions. The most startling aspect of the judicial order was that the Muslim defendants in the title suit were not given a chance to intervene in the hearing even though they rushed to the court on February 1, 1986 when they learnt that the court was considering unlocking the gates and throw open the shrine to Hindu devotees. The young lawyer had first pleaded before the Faizabad *munsif* that the lock be opened, contending that the gate had been locked in 1949 because the local administration feared a law and order problem but that the situation had altered in 1986.

The *munsif*, however, refused to pass any order as the files of the title suit were in the High Court. However, Pandey persisted and on February 1 argued before the district judge who promptly summoned the local officials. After the superintendent of police stated that he did not envisage any breach in security if the lock was opened, the judge complied and directed that the gate be unlocked. In less than an hour after the order passed without summoning the records of the Title suit and the Hindu residents of the twin towns were a jubilant lot as the news spread that the "Ram Janmabhoomi had been liberated". The *ex parte* judgment was widely commended by the supporters of the RSS clan though it came in for sharp criticism from its political adversaries. Although there was a concerted demand that the Union government direct the state government of Uttar Pradesh to

appeal against the district judge's order in the High Court, it was not done. This prompted charges that the lock had been opened as a sop to the RSS clan in return for bowing to the pressure of Muslim fundamentalists in enacting the Muslim Women's Protection Bill a year earlier.

With the government prevaricating on the issue, Mohammed Hashim Ansari, a Muslim resident of Ayodhya, decided to move the High Court and on February 3 pleaded that since the district judge had given his verdict in the "absence of the parties" the Court must stay the district judge's verdict. The partisan nature of the judiciary was evident when the Court ruled that the nature of property "shall not be changed" till further orders. The judiciary continued to exhibit lethargy in settling the legal dispute even as the Sunni Waqf Board moved the High Court in May, making a plea similar to that of Hashim Ansari's. However, no order was issued immediately and the dispute over the Babri Masjid lingered and gathered storm in India. The demand of various Muslim organisations and the non-BJP opposition that the state government be asked to transfer the title suit to the High Court was not complied with, with the state government, instead, pleading before the court in December 1987 that the files of the suit be transferred back to the district judge of Faizabad. In Faizabad, the case made little headway even as the VHP mounted its campaign, and offensively declared that the suit was frivolous because no court could determine whether the Babri Masjid was the birthplace of Ram.

The absurdity surrounding the legal dispute over the Babri Masjid was most evident in a petition filed by the VHP vice-president, Deoki Nandan Aggrawal, in July 1989. In this suit, the fifth in the long chain of legal cases, Aggrawal pleaded before the District judge of Faizabad that he be considered as the "next best friend of the deities" and that he was filing the petition on "behalf of Ram Lalla Virajman". The VHP leader, who had retired as a High Court judge, pleaded that the "entire premises of Ram Janmabhoomi be declared as belonging to the plaintiff's

deities, and perpetual injunction against the defendants prohibiting them from interfering with, placing any objection in the construction of a new temple building after demolishing the existing buildings and structures". The case was admitted by the judge who was "overawed by the fact that a retired judge had come to him as a plaintiff".

By the time Aggrawal filed his case, the controversy surrounding the controversial Howitzer gun deal, had reached a flashpoint, and elections were due later that year. Ever since the Bofors issue had surfaced, the Babri Masjid issue had taken a back seat in the list of government priorities. However, with elections imminent, the state government was virtually forced to act and it sought to expedite its application, pending with the High Court to transfer the title suit, and Aggrawal's suit to the High Court, so that it could be heard by a Special Bench. The Lucknow Bench of the High Court heard the matter in July, and allowed the withdrawal of the case from the Faizabad District Judge's court. The matter came up again before the High Court in August, and the Court ruled that all the property in relation to the five suits should "maintain status quo", and none of the parties could change "the nature of the property in question".

The interim order of the High Court set the tone for the Union government's move to legally allow shilanyas, and the site chosen by the VHP to dig up the graveyard, was shown to be outside the disputed area as per the sketch map of the leading case in the title suit. However, the fact that the map was not to scale, was not taken into account because the Union government was keen to allow shilanyas as it did not want to alienate the Hindu vote bank in the year of the general elections.

If the legal dispute over the Babri Masjid had been convoluted from the time the first case was filed, it only became more complex after the National Front formed the government, as it could neither alienate the support of the Muslims that the Janata Dal, its main constituent, had received in the elections, nor could it adopt a posture that would lead to the BJP withdrawing support

from the minority government. The Special Bench thus went through its motions even as the VHP questioned the "maintainability of the case filed by the Sunni Board". The argument advanced was that the case was not maintainable since "only a *mutwalli* and not a Waqf Board can enforce a legal right on a mosque," and since the *mutwalli* of the Babri Masjid was not the plaintiff, the court should dismiss the suit. The matter was raised by Ram Chandra Paramhans in the Supreme Court in January 1990, and the Court directed the High Court to listen to the arguments regarding it.

Political developments once again had their impact on the politics surrounding the Babri Masjid, and the BJP and other RSS affiliates prepared for another confrontation with the Union government. Meanwhile, Paramhans sought to withdraw his suit, arguing that he had "lost all hope in the judiciary". The main developments in the dispute over the Ayodhya shrine from the later half of 1990 were essentially political, rather than legal. It was also becoming increasingly evident that the judiciary was finding it tough to tackle the case and take a definite position because of the manner in which the issue had come to dominate the political agenda in India. V.P. Singh had to resign as Prime Minister, following the BJP decision to withdraw support, and the title suit was virtually put in cold storage as elections followed.

By the time the BJP came to power in Uttar Pradesh, it was not clear whether the judiciary, like other wings of the state machinery, was also getting divided on communal lines. This was of great importance as the Special Bench composed of two Hindu judges and one Muslim judge. The BJP claimed that its victory in Uttar Pradesh was a "mandate to build the Ram temple," and it was clear that it was only a matter of time before the Muslims would be completely dispossessed of the Babri Masjid. The legal dispute took another turn when the Uttar Pradesh government's decision to acquire 2.7744 acres of land in Ayodhya, was challenged in the High Court. Like other pre-

vious cases, this also dragged on with the Court delaying its final verdict till a week after the demolition. The interim ruling further complicated matters, as it allowed the state government the right to build temporary structures without transferring the land to the VHP, as intended by the BJP. This gave the state government the opportunity to start demolishing structures, including Hindu temples, around the Babri Masjid. While the demolition violated the High Court's interim order in the title suit, to maintain status quo of the disputed property the Court did not take any action to prevent it. By the time the VHP started its kar seva programme in July 1992, it appeared that the entire judiciary was not keen to pass a verdict on the dispute. The issue had become political and any solution had to be political in character. The Supreme Court, which was moved in December 1991, transferred the writ petitions on the decision of the Uttar Pradesh government to acquire the land to the High Court but it sat on the matter. With the Union government demonstrating no sense of urgency to resolve the Ayodhya dispute, the judiciary also evinced little interest in the matter. The Union government wanted to use the judiciary as a shield, in its political battle with the RSS clan, but the judiciary was unwilling to be used as such. The Supreme Court appointed an observer to ensure that no construction was carried out in Ayodhya. The observer had no report to file on the night of December 6, simply because the only activity that had taken place was demolition.

For the Muslims of India, the judicial process has been a long haul. The role of the judiciary, even after the demolition, has also been no different as the Presidential reference to determine whether a Hindu structure existed at the site of the Babri Masjid was also not taken up swiftly. In a situation where Indian Muslims have no official forum to seek recourse to, the Citizens' Tribunal on Ayodhya has assumed great significance.





## CHAPTER 6

# Prahārkāṇḍ



*Dark-gray cloud masses  
Obscuring the horizon  
Mile after mile after mile,  
Traversing forested hills,  
Skirting inaccessible jungles,  
Childishly aggressive,  
Swift as wing they covered  
The face of earth.  
Some did handsprings  
Stamped their feet,  
Clambered up hills,  
Roaring and screaming,  
Lakhs and lakhs of them,  
Energetic vanars...*

**From The Ramayan's Yudhkand**

**L**al Krishna Advani ascended to the presidency of the Bharatiya Janata Party in May 1986, a decision taken in order to give a marked Hindu thrust to the character of the party. By that time the political scenario in India had begun to resemble the time in 1973 when Indira Gandhi showed the first signs of stumbling. Even though Gandhi was no longer a personae in the Indian political theatre, she had bequeathed the mantle of power to her son Rajiv. As in the aftermath of the Bangladesh problem, the euphoria of the landslide victory for Rajiv Gandhi, quickly evaporated as the ruling party displayed its inability to govern

the country effectively. The situation became more and more heated in late 1986. A financial scandal surfaced and the opposition leaders found ammunition in the form of Michael Hershman. Non-Congress political parties found more ammunition when V.P. Singh, the Union Finance Minister under Rajiv Gandhi was divested of his portfolio, and shifted to another department because of his role in highlighting the Hershman issue.

In March 1987, another lurid scandal gave even more strength to Rajiv Gandhi's opponents. This was the infamous Bofors controversy, sparked off following a sensational disclosure by Swedish Radio. This suggested that the manufacturers of the Swedish Howitzers had paid Indian politicians a kickback to the tune of Rs 1500 crores, for guaranteeing the purchase of their guns, and not those manufactured by their rivals. After the Bofors controversy came to the fore, it dogged attention and dominated India's agenda. 'Corruption in high places', became the central theme of the campaign of Rajiv's antagonists both inside his party, and outside it. A crucial role in this period was played by V.P. Singh, who manoeuvred his expulsion from the Congress in June 1987, and later went on to form Jan Morcha, a political conglomerate of rebel Congressmen.

The situation bore a great resemblance to the time before Indira Gandhi imposed Internal Emergency with the non-Congress opposition parties enacting their roles with great cohesion. V.P. Singh emerged as the symbol of the fight against Rajiv Gandhi, who now epitomised a corrupt regime. By the end of 1987, it had become clear that it was just a matter of time before V.P. Singh emerged as the main contender for the Prime Minister's post at the next general elections. The moot question was what kind of political formation would ensure the victory of V.P. Singh and his combine at those elections. The Janata Party experiment was still fresh in the minds of people. With the various factions that had been formed after the split in the party, working in close association with V.P. Singh, there were expectations that another political

conglomerate of anti-Congress forces could be thrown together. There were great similarities, including the presence of a former Congressman in the ranks of the anti-Congress parties.

The BJP however, preferred to distance itself from the attempt to cobble together a united front of anti-Congress parties. The BJP had "learnt from the Janata experience"<sup>1</sup> of the Jana Sangh, that it would be difficult for a political conglomerate formed by politicians from diverse ideological backgrounds, to remain a cohesive unit for long. The party leadership was clear about two things nevertheless: One that the "ouster of this corrupt and worthless government (Rajiv Gandhi's government) is the No 1 issue before the people, and should take precedence before everything else".<sup>2</sup> Secondly, they were also clear that the party would "continue the struggle against the government until its removal and replacement by a more responsible government".<sup>3</sup> At the time the BJP joined the opposition agitation against the Rajiv Gandhi government, it had no visions of the party sharing power at the Centre. The BJP was more concerned with securing political credibility which in 1988 it did not possess. In order to achieve its first goal, the BJP was keen to project itself as a principled party that would not rush into another 'Janata-type' merger of parties merely to defeat the Congress and come to power.

The BJP participated in and often spearheaded actions initiated by other opposition parties. Always though, it was consciously trying to project the old image of the Jana Sangh as a party whose leaders were not power seekers, but were instead moralistic in their approach, and would not stoop to petty political machinations. The BJP in this way confessed that the Jan Sangh had erred in joining the Janata Party, and that the mistake would not be repeated. The signal being sent by the BJP to the Indian electorate is best summarised by the assertion of Advani that the BJP "has always been of the view that mere aggregation of disparate groups without a coherent set of policies and programmes to hold them together cannot inspire confidence in

the people, and that therefore far more important than opposition unity is opposition credibility".<sup>4</sup> The BJP was clear that being anti-Congress alone could not be the basis for a new political conglomerate. There were several issues on which the BJP had irreconcilable differences with other opposition parties, which was why they would not merge into any new party. Instead the BJP would "continue to concentrate on organisational activity at the grassroots, and on issue-oriented agitations aimed at mobilising farmers, consumers, youth, women, and Harijans."<sup>5</sup>

Even though the BJP had reservations regarding the nascent efforts to form a new party, they realised that it would be difficult for them to register growth if they ploughed a lonely furrow. In the northern state of Haryana, the BJP joined forces with aging Jat leader Devi Lal, to set up an agitation against the Congress government in the state. The agitation, conducted under the aegis of the Haryana Sangharsh Samiti, alarmed the Congress sufficiently for it to delay elections to the state assembly from March 1987 to May 1987. The BJP worked out an alliance with the Lok Dal led by Devi Lal even though there "were many obstacles in the negotiations regarding seat adjustments".<sup>6</sup> The ensuing elections saw the total marginalisation of the Congress, as it managed to win only 5 seats out of the total of 87 for which elections were held. The BJP had an impressive tally of 15 but the Lok Dal won 58 of the seats and, in the process secured a two thirds majority on its own. The BJP was asked to join the state government, as Devi Lal had pledged that the parties active in the Sangharsh Samiti would "fight elections together and would form the government jointly after winning the elections".<sup>7</sup> Suraj Bhan, the leader of the BJP group in the state assembly, became a Minister in the Haryana government. This was the first instance of the BJP sharing power, and it endorsed the decision of the BJP leadership to strike out tactical electoral alliances. The results were significant in the sense that this was the first major electoral humiliation of Rajiv Gandhi after being elevated into power. For the BJP, the elections indicated a "turning point in

the politics of the country.”<sup>8</sup>

The Haryana elections were also significant in the form of a tacit alliance between the BJP and the communist parties. Even though the two groups were diametrically opposite ideologically, they agreed to an indirect electorate alliance. Indirect, because, both had an understanding with the Lok Dal: The two communist parties were allocated one seat each by the “senior partner”<sup>9</sup> while the BJP had been asked to field candidates from 18 seats. The BJP sought to argue that it did not have an alliance with the communist parties. It set up a candidate from one of the two seats left to the communists, but did not oppose the other. This trend was of great significance in next general elections of 1989 when the BJP and the two communist parties individually worked out electoral alliances with the National Front combine even while contesting against each other in some constituencies. The pattern of the Haryana assembly elections and its repetition in 1989 was instrumental in providing the quantum jump both in popularity and acceptability of the BJP in such a short time. They cleverly utilised to their own advantage the desire of other non-Congress parties to defeat the Congress and come to power. The strategy was sagacity itself, and akin to the old adage of using somebody else’s shoulder to fire from.

### **Underlining Distinct Identity**

Back, in 1988, the BJP had been keen to drive home its mistrust of the communist parties, and its differences with the two parties. This was sharply in evidence in the election for the new President of India in June 1988. The Presidential elections were held at a time when the Rajiv Gandhi government appeared to be running out of steam, out of luck, and out of excuses. It faced fresh problems when President Zail Singh appeared to be taking out his ire on Rajiv Gandhi. The Congress nominated R. Venkataraman as its candidate for the Presidency, and his victory was never in doubt because of the massive majority of the ruling

party in the electoral college comprising members of Parliament and state legislative bodies. However, the opposition parties decided to field a candidate for a symbolic contest and requested a former Chief Justice of India, V.K. Krishna Iyer, to contest the elections as the joint opposition candidate. However, the BJP decided to abstain from voting in the elections because the communist parties were "bent upon foisting their choice on the Opposition without regard to the prospects of success."<sup>10</sup> The BJP also maintained that the "person chosen for the Presidency of India should be an outstanding man with a distinguished record of national service. He/she should be non-controversial."<sup>11</sup> The party also held that it would be best for the country, if the process of electing the President is "insulated from partisan politics, so that the choice ultimately reflects a national consensus."<sup>12</sup>

In the 1988 elections for the Presidency, the BJP was piqued because the Congress "did not think it necessary to consult the Opposition parties,"<sup>13</sup> and that some opposition parties "did not think it necessary to involve even other opposition parties in selecting their candidate."<sup>14</sup> The BJP strategy in the elections for the Haryana assembly and the Presidential elections was one of striking tactical alliance, to ensure the party's growth and also underline the BJP's differences with other opposition groups. Even while being a part of the broad anti-Congress platform, the BJP was keen to demonstrate its independent position on crucial issues. The BJP could be considered a partner in the opposition strategy, but not an integral part. The BJP highlighted this distinction between it and other opposition parties by contending that "where other parties have cooperated in this effort (agitate for the dismissal of the government) we have readily participated in concerted action. Where they have taken a line which we felt would only strengthen the Rajiv government, as they did under pressure from the Communist parties in respect of the Presidential elections, the BJP has not hesitated to take an independent line."<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, the BJP was most pragmatic in understanding



that the Congress could not be defeated if there was a division of votes among non-Congress parties. The results in Haryana demonstrated that the Congress could be defeated in the elections only if the opposition fielded a joint candidate from the majority of seats. Throughout 1988 and 1989 the BJP keenly followed the development within other opposition parties. This first led to the merger of the Lok Dal, the Janata Party and the Jan Morcha, with the new party called Janata Dal. Subsequently, the National Front was formed comprising the Janata Dal, the Congress(S) and the regional parties from Andhra Pradesh Telugu Desam, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam from Tamil Nadu, and Asom Gana Parishad from Assam. When elections were announced for the general elections, the leaders of the National Front started independent negotiations with the BJP and the communist parties to forge an electoral alliance.

The strategy of the Haryana elections was repeated even though there were several constituencies where the BJP and the communist candidates were locked in multi-cornered contests. The BJP benefited greatly by retaining its separate identity even while coming to an electoral understanding. Barring a few stray constituencies, the BJP, the National Front, and the Left Front did not lock horns, and this led to the defeat of the Congress even though no party, including the National Front, secured a clear majority, leading to the phase of coalition governments sustained by support from outside. The BJP made spectacular gains in the 1989 elections, with the number of its parliamentarians jumping from the total of two in 1984, to 89. It was now evident that the BJP had come to occupy a pivotal position in Indian polity and even though it did not share power with the National Front, it was apparent that the Union government was at the mercy of the BJP.

The manifold growth of the BJP in 1989 stemmed from two factors. First, by shrewdly aligning itself with the anti-congress opposition parties, and sensing that the Indian electorate was keen to jettison the Congress if a viable alternative appeared in

the offing. Secondly, the BJP also reaped the benefits of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Ram temple agitation. It projected itself as the only political party that considered the temple agitation to be a legitimate one, and a right one at that, to undo the "historical wrong". The BJP was also aided in its rise to the pivotal position by the inability of other non-Congress parties to assess the ultimate plan of the BJP. This was evident in the manner in which the non-Congress opposition parties forged alliances with the BJP, solely to defeat the Congress and paid scant regard to what the BJP could gain from such alliances. The BJP was aided therefore, by the political myopia of non-Congress opposition parties. This included the communists, who as we have seen forged indirect political alliance with the BJP, in the general elections of 1989, and in the elections for the state assembly in Haryana in 1987.

The BJP's new thrust began in 1986, when Advani was elected president, after the sidelining of Atal Behari Vajpayee. Shrewdly, the BJP did not get directly embroiled in the VHP agitation. Instead, the party waited for the agitation to gain momentum, and when the political developments started snowballing towards a crisis, the BJP cleverly played the 'temple card' and reaped electoral benefits from the supporters of the temple agitation. Before the BJP formally adopted the temple agitation as part of the party programme, they did not attempt to refrain any of their members or leaders from associating with the VHP agitation. This was most evident in the participation of Vijaya Raje Scindia, the wife of the former prince of Gwalior state and party vice president, in the VHP agitation, and her dual status as BJP office-bearer and VHP patron. In fact, from the time the VHP launched its temple agitation and started its campaign, the BJP had virtually two machineries at its disposal: Its own cadre drawn from the RSS fold, and the neo-converts to the VHP fold.

The first move critical of the government after the elevation of Advani was the listing of a 50-point chargesheet against them. The accusation was that the "unity, integrity, security, and

honour of India" was in "more danger than at any time since Independence."<sup>16</sup> However, the *raison d'être* of the listing of failures of the government, was that when Rajiv Gandhi assumed office it was expected that a "dynamic modern man would smash the shackles of obscurantism and bigotry and lead the country into the 21st century; and a Mr Clean would sweep clean the Congress(I) stables of corruption and incompetence."<sup>17</sup> The chargesheet was the result of the failure of the government to live up to its initial promise.

The chargesheet found no space for the Ayodhya dispute as the issue had been temporarily resolved in favour of the VHP and its allies with the opening of the locks in February 1986. However, the BJP listed the government decision to pass the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill and demanded that Hindus and Muslims should have common civil laws. The BJP accused the government of bowing to pressure from the Muslim League on the issue even though it had initially welcomed the Supreme Court verdict on the Shah Bano case. The BJP maintained that after the Muslim League mounted its offensive against the court verdict, the "government lost nerve, and decided to turn tail." A large number of charges listed against the Rajiv Gandhi government pertained to its inability to manage the growing national problems in Punjab, Kashmir, and the north eastern states even though the Centre had signed an accord with those agitating within a year of Rajiv Gandhi's ascendancy. The indictment in the chargesheet was simple: India has a "government that cannot govern, a Prime Minister who cannot administer, a leader who cannot lead". The charges against the government were listed before the Fairfax controversy had surfaced and before any major financial scandal had come to the fore. The tone therefore had been set by the BJP. It now showed signs of recovery from the shocking defeat of 1984 and was positioning itself for participating in the opposition campaign against Rajiv Gandhi. By the time the crisis had set in for the Congress in April 1987, with the Bofors controversy, the BJP

had revamped its organisational machinery and had started making shrewd moves in tandem with other opposition parties. They never lost sight of their decision to retain a separate identity however.

Meanwhile, much of the political agenda on the Ayodhya dispute was set by Muslim leaders. Meetings were organised, memorandums submitted, and Muslims were mobilised cutting across party lines. In each of the moves, the Union government was petitioned to direct the Uttar Pradesh government to seek a judicial review of the District Judge's order, but they were unsympathetic. This led to the formation of several groups of agitating Muslim leaders, who succeeded in projecting the Babri Masjid as the symbol of Muslim pride in India. It had to be restored to the community if the Muslims were to live with dignity in the country. The VHP on its part was complacent for the first few months after the locks had been opened. Its immediate demand had been met and Hindu devotees had access to the shrine. It has been argued on several occasions that the Ayodhya dispute would not have become a recurring issue had the Muslim leadership not provided a strident tone to their agitation.

Some of the Muslim leaders, who played a crucial role in the initial months after the unlocking of the gates, have contended that the Muslim leadership made little effort to address themselves to the majority of Hindus who at that stage did not support either the VHP or its agitation. The Muslim leaders also made little effort to enlist the support of non-Muslim politicians with secular credentials. Instead, the entire dispute was projected as a Muslim versus Hindu dispute which left non-Muslim politicians with little chance to intervene. The hard stance of the Muslim leadership also aided the VHP which was quick to mount a campaign arguing that the Muslims were not sensitive to Hindu sentiments. The shriller the pitch of the Muslim leadership, the greater was the boost to the VHP. Consequently the spread of the Hindutva idea that saw the Muslims as natural adversaries who had to be tamed into submission and Ayodhya

were the main issue on which the Hindus could not relent.

As a part of its campaign to secure the restoration of the Babri Masjid, the Muslim leaders organised a show of strength in Delhi in December 1986. By this time a predictable tussle for power had begun within the Muslim leadership. With each wanting to outwit the other, the leaders felt that the one giving the most belligerent call would emerge as the undisputed leader. This led to Syed Shahabuddin giving a call to Muslims to boycott the Republic Day celebration in 1987. At this same meeting a call was given to Muslims that they should prepare themselves for a march to Ayodhya to "claim the mosque for themselves as the government was doing nothing on the matter."<sup>18</sup> There were loud protests, most notably from the BJP which met for its executive session at Vijayawada in the last week of December, and the first week of January. Advani, continuing the criticism of the Rajiv Gandhi government, argued that it was being increasingly weak-kneed and could be easily pushed into a corner, and forced into submission by minority groups. He said the threatened boycott was a "case in point. The move is anti-national, it is inflammatory, irresponsible."<sup>19</sup>

There were pleas from other opposition parties for the withdrawal of the boycott call, which Shahabuddin ultimately accepted to do. Unfortunately, by then the damage had been done. For the larger part of 1987, the VHP publicity machinery cited the boycott call to argue that the Muslims had put "religion over the nation". They were further aided by the decision of the Muslim leadership to give the call for a "long march" to Ayodhya, at another rally in March 1987. The BJP president, L.K. Advani joined issues with the Muslim leadership, by declaring that the speeches of the Muslim leaders were an "unabashed attempt to intimidate the nation by threats of violence". The statement issued a day after the rally on March 30, 1987 hinted at the future agenda of the BJP. Advani declared that the dispute was "not just a legal issue, nor is it merely a question of history. It is essentially a question of a nation's identity. Whom must this

nation identify with; Ram or with Babur?"<sup>20</sup> The BJP leader further suggested that the Muslim leadership, he specifically named Shahabuddin which indicated that the BJP and its allies had come to recognise the former IFS officer as the chief spokesman for Muslims, would "like Hindus to identify with Ram, and Muslims with Babur. BJP rejects this perverse and separatist approach and holds that all patriots, Hindus and Muslims, cannot but identify themselves with Ram and recognise Babur for what he was, a foreign invader."<sup>21</sup>

### **Escalating Communal Tension**

With the Congress facing one crisis after another, rocked by financial scandals and internal dissidence. There was little political thought or will to tackle the deteriorating communal situation in the country. Following the rally in Delhi, communal forces within the country found fresh fodder as returning Muslims were either felicitated within their community or ridiculed by the supporters of the VHP. While Muslims hoisted black flags to demonstrate their anger over the Ayodhya issue, VHP supporters were quick to put up saffron flags. Street rallies and provocative slogans became the order of the day, in many sensitive areas. The situation was becoming particularly alarming in Uttar Pradesh, with the "state intelligence bureau constantly feeding reports to the Home Ministry that the threatened show of force over the never-ending Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid, issue could precipitate communal trouble in sensitive districts, particularly in Meerut, Rampur, Moradabad, Kanpur and Allahabad."<sup>22</sup> Yet again, the government did not act, making no effort to take preventive measures. Another report said: "A major part of Uttar Pradesh has witnessed tremendous communalisation ever since the issue of Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi surfaced."<sup>23</sup>

The situation in Meerut had also turned nasty, as "being very close to Delhi, a large number of Muslims from there went to

participate in the rally. Some of them even wore shrouds... The militancy among the Muslims was growing on this question. The Hindus were by no means less aggressive, perhaps a degree more. If Muslims raised the slogan: 'We Muslims are 30 crores, we will wring blood out of you,' the Hindus shouted 'Hindus and Sikhs are brothers, where did the Muslim community come from,' and 'If you want to live in India, you have to live like a Hindu.' These slogans were painted on the walls of Meerut."<sup>24</sup>

Finally the carbuncle burst in Meerut in April 1987. On the day that Muslims celebrating *shab-e-barat*, the Muslim festival seeking deliverance of the loved ones who have died, it was clear that the Ayodhya dispute had "played havoc. The politics of confrontation, has wrought this destruction. VHP and Babri Action Committee are the real culprits."<sup>25</sup> The phase of Hindu-Muslim rioting in April that left nearly a score dead was however contained. Although tensions were still running high in the city, the local administration made no effort to monitor the situation, and thus prevent another outbreak of communal violence. Less than a month later, Meerut was again rocked by rioting. One of the most serious riots erupted on May 18, 1987. These riots were sparked off in a largely Muslim colony. A small stall "belonging to a Muslim was set on fire by some miscreants,"<sup>26</sup> was followed by unprecedented attacks on Muslim life and property. What, made the situation in Meerut more shocking, was the participation of the security forces mainly the controversial Provincial Armed Constabulary in these selective attacks. There were two specific incidents for which the PAC was held guilty: The first at a locality called Hashimpura from where Muslim youths were rounded up in police trucks, they were later shot and their bodies dumped in the nearby canal. The second case took place in a nearby village called Maliyana where policemen systematically shot dead Muslim inhabitants. Riots in Meerut in this phase also spread to areas previously not affected by communal violence. They included middle class colonies, and indicated that the Hindus of this class were slowly accepting the VHP argument. One

of the people whose house was ransacked and later torched was that of Bashir Badr, an eminent Urdu poet known for his nationalistic views. There were allegations that the state government had been aware of the violence perpetuated against the Muslims by the security forces. There were also accusations that the Chief Minister Vir Bahadur Singh, had been directly involved, and the attacks had "happened with his connivance".<sup>27</sup> He was summoned to Delhi by Rajiv Gandhi and the prime minister admitted that "communal conflicts were posing a grave danger to the country."<sup>28</sup>

Even now it is difficult to state the exact number of people who died. But there were figures which ranged from the grossly exaggerated to the drastically reduced. One of the accounts of the riots states, that "it is rumoured that more than twenty thousand died. But it is a ridiculously high figure. This belief gets strengthened by discovery of bodies every day from *nullahs*, cells and obscure corners. Two other more moderate estimates are of the dead as 1,500 and 350. The Government admits only a little over hundred deaths which again seems far below the actual number. My guess is about 400 deaths in these riots."<sup>29</sup> The riots in Meerut also spilled over to neighbouring areas in UP, and also broke out in the capital on May 22, 1987. In Delhi also, the Muslims accused the police of complicity in the attacks on them, that led to the Shahi Imam of the Jama Masjid to close the mosque for two weeks, in protest against government policies. This was the first time that the mosque had been shut down by the mosque management it had been previously closed by the British after the rebellion in 1857 for five years and a huge banner outside the locked up mosque declared that this had been done to "protest against extreme atrocities and barbarism."<sup>30</sup> The riots in Meerut and its neighbouring areas, the most serious of Hindu-Muslim clashes after the Ayodhya dispute, came to the fore with the opening of the locks, underscored two most vital aspects. Firstly, both the bureaucracy and the security forces were beginning to exhibit their bias against the Muslims. Secondly, it was clear that the Ayodhya controversy had emerged



as the focal point of Hindu-Muslim conflict and unless it was speedily resolved by the government there would be "many more Meeruts".

There was virtual unanimity among non-BJP opposition parties, and several sections of the intelligentsia that the Ayodhya dispute had to be settled. In a letter to Rajiv Gandhi on May 25, 1987 General Secretary of the Communist Party of India, C. Rajeshwar Rao, categorically stated that the "background of the present wave of communal violence is, of course, the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi controversy...I must say that the Central government and the UP government cannot escape responsibility." The UP unit of the Indian People's Front, while charging the government with the "conspiratorial decision" to unlock the gates, stated that the decision "swept the country with a new communal frenzy, and Meerut has become its victim". A large number of leading intellectuals also issued a statement recognising the fact that the Ayodhya "syndrome has been exploited by both sides to rouse passions. This must stop and the issue be settled by negotiations, arbitration or judicial process. In the meantime all demonstrations must be banned."<sup>31</sup> The National Federation of Progressive Writers, went one step further by demanding that the controversy could be ended by declaring the disputed shrine a "protected national monument" and placing it under the custody of the Archaeological Survey of India.

There was also criticism from within the ruling party. Arif Mohammed Khan, who had earned the ire of the traditional Muslim leadership for advocating the rejection of the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill, had started distancing himself from the party leadership, in preparation for the final parting of ways. He later teamed up with V.P. Singh and other rebel Congressmen to form the Jan Morcha. In a virtual indictment of Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, Khan asked in a letter, "it is not known how you have distracted yourself from the popular policy of secularism and compromised with communal and divisive forces". A similar posture was adopted by

another rebel Congress Minister, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, who asked Rajiv Gandhi that "if the Congress does not uphold the banner of secularism with seriousness and resolute determination, who else will do? What I saw in Meerut has shaken me to the bones. What has saddened me more is the inadequacy of our response".

However, the government gripped by internal problems and financial scandals coming to the fore, prevaricated on the issue, and did little of substance even as the Muslim leadership showed aggressive signs of increasing the pitch of the agitation. The VHP responded by declaring that it would give a "fitting answer"<sup>32</sup> to the Babri Action Committee. The only action by the government in this direction, was the appointment of a three-member cabinet sub-committee, comprising Home Minister Buta Singh, P.V. Narasimha Rao, and P. Shiv Shankar to devise a "line of action" for the settlement of the dispute. This committee made little impact, as it did not meet even once for nearly two months after its formation, and even then it did nothing to settle the dispute.

Even by the middle of 1987, it was becoming resoundingly clear that the Congress, though not facing an immediate threat would find the going tough in the next general elections two years later. Corruption had become the dominant issue in the political theatre of India, and V.P. Singh had the aura of a clean honest man who had been hounded out of the government for trying to expose those involved in corrupt practices. The process of an opposition unity of sorts had already been initiated during the assembly elections in Haryana in May 1987. It was only a matter of time before a united front of sorts would fructify, and Rajiv Gandhi would face the greatest acid test of his short political career, as smaller regional parties joined in the effort to project a national alternative to the Congress. The ruling party appeared to be rudderless, not working to a definite plan, and seemed to be merely involving itself in a series of crisis limitation exercises. This approach was also evident in their handling of the growing

Hindu-Muslim tensions. The broad assessment of the party was that the Muslims had been placated by the capitulation of the Union government on the Shah Bano case, and hard-nosed Hindus had been assuaged by opening the locks of the Ayodhya shrine. The approach of the Congress was to take along with it communal forces from both communities. By 1987, of all the political parties, only the BJP had a definite viewpoint on the Ayodhya dispute as evident in Advani's assertion discussed earlier. Other political parties were primarily concerned with fire-fighting, or by calling for a negotiated settlement, details of which they were unable to spell out.

Analysing the events of 1987, and the subsequent years leading up to the defeat of Rajiv Gandhi in the 1989 general elections, it becomes clear that the opposition parties had worked out an understanding with the BJP. This was done without really understanding or giving scant regard to the way the BJP approached the long-simmering Hindu-Muslim conflict. It was primarily for the short-term gain of defeating the Congress. The Congress too failed to comprehend the political implications and the sole gainer was the BJP. The political drama that followed after the exit of V.P. Singh from the Congress fold, was highlighted by the personality clash between Rajiv Gandhi on the one hand and V.P. Singh and his allies, including Gandhi's cousin Arun Nehru, on the other. There were some stray voices of concern at the association of the opposition parties with the BJP, but those voices were lost in the din and dust generated by the anti-Congress euphoria, and beneath the populist slogans on the need to cleanse India of corrupt politicians. They were also drowned in the boisterous victory celebrations after the results of the Haryana assembly elections. The BJP in this period, cleverly kept its temple card in the background. It never denied though its commitment to the VHP agitation and in the process ensured its rise as a significant political force in India, without ever diluting its ideological orientation.

Throughout 1987, India was a veritable battlefield across

which both VHP and Muslim leaders espousing the pros and cons of the Babri Masjid. They traded charges and vitiated the atmosphere with the government remaining a passive spectator. Even as Meerut limped to normalcy, these two warring groups had started preparing for the next round of confrontation. By this time the VHP had floated yet another organisation called the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas, established with the professed goal of rebuilding the "magnificent temple" after "shifting" the Babri Masjid. The new organisation was formed with the twin aims of appointing as office-bearers those who had not been accommodated in the existing organisations, and the desire of the RSS dominated VHP leadership to continue their strategy of working through affiliates which had now increased appreciably in number.

The Muslim leadership had also formed an apex body called Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee, with Syed Shahabuddin as its chief spokesman. The committee had submitted a memorandum to the government shortly before the Meerut riots broke out. This demanded that the government undertake efforts to speed up the judicial settlement by seeking the withdrawal of the title suit from the Faizabad court and getting the dispute heard by a Special Bench of the High Court. The Committee also demanded that the government must enact a law ensuring the protection of all religious shrines in the condition they were in, at the time of Independence in 1947. This demand was made as a consequence of several VHP leaders asserting in public meetings and news conferences that Ayodhya was "just the first milestone." There were several other Hindu shrines that had to be "liberated from the clutches of Muslims."<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, in June 1987, the VHP also mounted a campaign and petitioned the government to hand over the existing structure to the Nyas for building the temple as the "question was a matter of prestige and dignity for the entire Hindu samaj."<sup>34</sup> Through a statement issued by the president of the Mukti Yagna Samiti, Mahant Avaidyanath, and its secretary, Dau Dayal Khanna, the

VHP demanded that the government must immediately comply with the decision of the Dharam Sansad. The two leaders cited the case of the rebuilding of the Somnath temple after Independence when the government had formed a Trust to rebuild the demolished temple where the idols were formally installed by Rajendra Prasad, India's first President. However, the government continued its somnambulist stance and in a reply to a question in Parliament on the Meerut riots, the government made no mention of the fact that the riots had been triggered off by the high level of animosity, between Hindus and Muslims over the Ayodhya issue. The reply merely gave a description of the steps taken by the government, and listed the number of official visitors to the troubled city. The reply also mentioned that a "Special Commissioner (Relief) assisted by a Deputy Commissioner (Relief) was posted at Meerut, to expedite the relief operations."<sup>35</sup> There was no mention of any political initiative to ensure that there were no more Meeruts."

If the government failed to take prompt action to settle the dispute, and the VHP were mounting a hostile campaign, the multi-faceted Muslim leadership, also contributed to the deteriorating Hindu-Muslim relations across India. The Muslim leadership indulged in double talk with one tone reserved for the intelligentsia, and non-BJP opposition parties. The other voice was used when addressing the Muslim community. To the former, Shahabuddin would say: "I would like to emphasise that while we regard the Babri Masjid as rightfully belonging to the Muslim community, our demand is not for the immediate restoration of the Masjid, but merely to set the judicial process in motion in order to determine the rights of the parties concerned and therefore the question of title."<sup>36</sup> The argument could not be faulted, and if along with such a petition, Shahabuddin requested parliamentarians and other leaders to join in at a sit-in outside Parliament (it was first scheduled for August 10, 1987 but later postponed by a week, because of a meeting of Aligarh Muslim University), it was perfectly plausible that the leaders

would join in the protest. However, when the Muslim leadership addressed themselves to the community, they played down the fact that the "immediate restoration" of the mosque to the community was neither possible, nor demanded. The Muslim leadership made little mention of the fact that its demand was supported by several political parties and leaders, the majority of them being Hindus. The Muslim leadership "gave the impression that it was taking on the Hindus as a community and not just the VHP."<sup>37</sup>

Eventually, there were some indications within the ranks of the new opposition conglomerate that several of its leaders were distressed with the vitriol being generated by the VHP. Shortly after the Meerut riots, V.P. Singh, who had by then been expelled from the Congress and was riding the high horse of the anti-corruption campaign, stated that the UP government should expedite the process to find a solution to the vexed Ayodhya dispute. He suggested that a possible way out could be to declare the shrine a National Monument, and that it should be handed over to the Archaeological Survey of India. This suggestion was however rejected by both the Muslim leadership as well as the VHP, as both parties were keen to keep the issue unresolved. The VHP and the RSS, which had started actively monitoring the progress of the Ayodhya campaign, sensed political ascendancy if the dispute lingered on. Similarly, the Muslim leadership was contented by being accepted as the sole spokesmen for the community, and did not want to lose their pivotal position.

The VHP however reacted formally to V.P. Singh's suggestion, and asked him to reconsider his position on the issue if he wanted the support of the VHP, in his campaign against the Congress. Dau Dayal Khanna the secretary of the Mukti Yagna Samiti, wrote Singh a letter on August 17, 1987, asking him to reconsider his position on the Ayodhya dispute as it would be an impediment in his call to join him in his "crusade against corruption". Khanna argued that Singh was making a mistake in associating the Muslim leadership in his campaign, as this

would anger the Hindus. He wrote: "You are demanding mid-term elections. For winning the elections you will need the support of the Hindu majority. For forming the government you will have to depend on Hindu votes to return your candidates. In case you and your allies want to declare the place as a National Monument, your candidates shall receive a crushing defeat as the overwhelming majority of Hindu voters will reject you and your combine. I may also inform you that the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti has publicly declared on July 9, 1987 in Delhi, that if the Ram Janmabhoomi is not restored to the Hindus then in the coming elections this will be made an issue by the samiti, asking the voters to elect only such candidates who declare that they will restore Shri Ram Janmabhoomi, Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi, and Shri Vishwanath Temple to the Hindu Samaj."<sup>38</sup> Khanna also declared that the BJP would not support the suggestion of Singh as the party was "committed to liberate the three religious places,"<sup>39</sup> and that if Singh doubted the claim of Khanna, he could "confirm this from the leadership of the BJP."<sup>40</sup>

Khanna's letter to Singh was widely reported in several newspapers, including his contention that the BJP was in agreement with the VHP agenda. The BJP made no attempt to deny the claims of Khanna and Singh, and his new found allies also did not seek the policy of the BJP on the question. The non-BJP opposition parties were solely concerned with the anti-corruption campaign and did not give much thought to the long-term impact of associating the BJP with it. The non-BJP opposition parties were lulled into complacency by the repeated assertion of BJP leaders that it was committed to "extend its full cooperation both inside and outside Parliament, to all efforts for cleansing the public life of the corrosive influence of stolen money, and for removing the corrupt Rajiv government."<sup>41</sup> Advani also indicated that he was supportive of Singh when he condemned a attack on Singh and his supporters by Congress activists in July 1987. He also warned that events of the "past few weeks should

serve as an ominous warning to all democrats that this government would have no qualms in repeating 1975, and clamping a second Emergency."<sup>42</sup> The BJP was clearly raising the vision of Emergency when persuading other opposition parties to forge their ranks, like in the mid-1970s. However, unlike on the earlier occasion, the BJP was firm in its resolve to retain its separate identity.

In contrast to the planned orchestration of the VHP, its allies and the Muslim leadership, the government's response in warding off the snowballing crisis was one of nonchalance. Barely a fortnight after communal riots in Meerut had erupted in April, 1987, Union Home Minister Buta Singh was to write to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Vir Bahadur Singh, "requesting him to work out steps to be taken with a firmly laid out time-table to resolve the issue."<sup>43</sup> The failure of the government in realising that the Ayodhya issue had transcended the limits of the township, and had become a national problem can be further gauged from the fact that the group of ministers met and decided, that "it would be better to allow the matter to be settled at the local level by the exercise of local initiatives."<sup>44</sup> This meeting was held in the capital on May 21, at a time when Meerut and several other cities, including Delhi, were close to flashpoint over the Ayodhya dispute. Yet the three ministers under the chairmanship of P.V. Narasimha Rao preferred to pass the matter to the state government, and called for local initiatives at a time when none of the main actors on the political theatre was locally connected with Ayodhya. However, even on the limited question of taking "local initiatives," the Union government showed no signs of urgency, and the next meeting of the group of ministers where some tangible recommendations were made, was held five months later on October 8, 1987. The Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh also attended the meeting, where the three Ministers opined that:

(1) Efforts should be made to insulate local opinion from the impact of controversy and prepare it to accept the judicial verdict



(2) It may be best to await the judicial verdict

(3) A statement could be prepared setting out the decisions taken by various groups to determine a common ground and come to an agreed settlement<sup>45</sup>

However, as later events demonstrated, neither of the recommendations of the committee was followed up adequately, and the initiative on the Ayodhya dispute remained with the VHP and the Muslim leadership. The Union government made no attempt to wrest it.

## **Declining Influence**

By the end of 1987, it was clear that the Rajiv Gandhi government was on its last lap, with the combined opposition front with V.P. Singh at its helm being slowly cobbled together, and beginning to emerge as the alternative to the Congress. The primary concern of the ruling party was predictably to extricate itself from the financial scandals that had rocked it and also to politically counter the emerging opposition front. Little thought was given to the Ayodhya dispute, as Congress leaders were more concerned about causing fissures in the opposition ranks and retaining its cadre within the party fold. With elections imminent and a shaky government, both the VHP and the Muslim leadership pitchforked themselves into positions from which they thought they could extricate the maximum benefits from the beleaguered government. Syed Shahabuddin had emerged as the 'hate symbol' of the VHP and its allies, and the former IFS officer reveled in his new found role as the "modern-day Jinnah". However, in the first months of 1988, the Ayodhya issue had not percolated down to the level of the people, as agitations remained in the realm of 'cleansing India of corruption in high places.' But, with the VHP groping for its next strategy, help came once again in the form of the Muslim leadership, which in January 1988, indicated that it was eager to increase the tempo of its agitation by calling for a "long march" to Ayodhya by

Muslims, to pressurise the government into restoring the mosque to them.

In a resolution adopted on January 24, 1988 the BMMCC expressed regret at the "continued insensitivity of the government, to the anguish of the Muslim community at the continued illegal occupation of the Babri Masjid and its de facto conversion into a temple." The Muslim leaders charged that their attempts at "finding a solution through bilateral talks had received no response," and that all attempts of the committee to highlight the issue through "democratic and peaceful agitations, *bandhs*, demonstrations... have been totally ignored". The other charges against the government included the failure of the cabinet sub-committee which did "not even make a serious study of the problem," and surrender to the "forces of chauvinism represented in particular by the VHP." The resolution also noted that the VHP had started preparations to "take over other mosques and shrines, adding to our (the Muslims') sense of religious insecurity". The BMMCC concluded that given the circumstances, the "Muslim community had been left with no option but to undertake the march to Ayodhya". It was decided at the meeting that state units of the committee would be asked to formally "intensify the enrollment of volunteers"<sup>46</sup> for the proposed march. Shahabuddin also wrote a letter to Rajiv Gandhi, in which besides apprising him of the decisions taken at this meeting, the BMMCC leaders made two specific demands: "Expeditious determination of title by a Special Bench of the High Court preferably in South India, and enactment of law to protect status of all places of worship as on August 15, 1947."<sup>47</sup>

The decision of the BMMCC had been preceded by a meeting of the VHP governing council at Tirumala on January 14, 1988. At the meeting VHP leaders mounted an attack on the Janata Party for wanting the government to enact a legislation that would restore "status quo ante of all places of worship as on August 15, 1947."<sup>48</sup> The VHP leaders warned that "if the Government or some political parties persisted in such attempts, it

would result in turmoil and serious conflicts in the country."<sup>49</sup> The meeting also noted that if the suggested legislation was passed, it would lead to the demolition of the Somnath temple in Veraval, Gujarat. However, it was evident that the VHP was unable to generate widespread popular support for its agitation, as the shrine was open to Hindu devotees and the organisation was yet unclear about its next step. In early 1988, the VHP had not yet come out with a concrete plan of the proposed new temple that the organisation wanted to build in Ayodhya. The primary agenda in India, as we have earlier seen, was corruption charges against the Rajiv Gandhi government. However, the BMMCC's call to march to Ayodhya gave the VHP just the impetus it needed. The organisation immediately mounted a series of low profile campaigns, during which its activists fanned out in various parts of India. Leaflets and other publicity material were printed by various state units of the VHP.

Both the VHP and the BMMCC mounted separate campaigns not only against each other, but also against the government for not settling the dispute in its favour. In spite of the animosity between the two, the parties agreed to negotiate when in early 1988, the president of the All India Shia Conference, Anjum Qader, succeeded in bringing the leaders of the two groups face to face for the first time in the plush environs of the government owned Ashok Hotel, in New Delhi. Though not formally instrumental in bringing the two sides across the table, the Union government nonetheless had "blessed" the initiative. However, the conclave failed to produce any solution. An account of the meeting says that the leaders "discussed all possible ways to resolve the Ayodhya tangle, including the CPI proposal of converting it into a national monument, but failed to agree. Only one thing on which they agreed, was to continue their struggles to consolidate themselves in their respective communities."<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the Union government took yet another abortive initiative in March 1988, when the Home Minister met the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, but little emerged from this meeting.

It had been more than four years since the VHP had launched the Ayodhya agitation. It had also been more than two years since the unlocking of the gates, leading to vociferous protests from the Muslim community and jubilations among the supporters of the VHP. This had led to a series of communal riots in various parts of India and there appeared to be no let-up in sight. Yet the government was not gripped by a sense of urgency to resolve the dispute. Non-BJP opposition parties also, besides the ritualistic statements calling upon people to maintain communal harmony and peacefully reason out the discord, made no attempt to take the issue to the people. Both Hindus and Muslims were being addressed solely by the VHP and the Muslim leadership, and this gave fillip to the communalisation of Indian polity throughout the late 1980s.

By 1988, the RSS too sensed its time and formally started jockeying for a key position in the political theatre of India. The RSS assessed that the VHP had made significant strides since the organisation was given a new direction in the early 1980s, and the BJP had firmly reverted to the traditional policies of the Jana Sangh and decided to retain its independent identity while participating in the opposition agitation against Rajiv Gandhi. This was the time when the RSS decided to give a greater ideological thrust to the Ram temple campaign. The RSS had been active in both the agitation for the Ram temple as well as the growing campaign against Rajiv Gandhi, yet the organisation was still acting through the affiliates VHP and BJP. By mid-1988, the RSS came out with a nationwide campaign to mark the birth centenary of its founder, Hedgewar, falling in 1989. Preparations started in early 1988, and the celebrations were initiated towards the end of the year. Meetings were held at various levels in different towns and cities. Among the first steps was to launch a massive project to paint graffiti on walls throughout India. There was hardly a town or city where the slogan '*Garv se kaho, hum Hindu hain*' (Say with pride that you are a Hindu) was not visible on the walls. There were other slogans too and in each of

those the RSS tried to bolster the “sagging morale” of Hindus.

Preparatory meetings for the anniversary function were held by RSS units at various levels. The consensus in these meetings was that the RSS should bolster its pro-Hindu image and articulate the political views that stemmed from its notion of Indian society. At one such meeting during the Hedgewar anniversary celebrations RSS *sarsanghchalak*, Balasaheb Deoras, declared in Jammu that the “root cause of most of the problems in the country was the government’s policy of appeasing the minorities.”<sup>51</sup> The assertions of Deoras at the end of a three-day tour to inaugurate the year-long centenary celebrations in Jammu were among the first holistic views on their agenda for India expressed by the RSS leadership in the 1980s. The RSS leader categorically stated that the organisation “will demand the restoration of the Krishna Janmabhoomi and the Vishwanath temple to the Hindus, after the success of the movement for the liberation of the Ram Janmabhoomi.”<sup>52</sup> Deoras also demanded the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, a demand which was now being regularly made by the BJP. Deoras also stated that the Muslims in Kashmir “need to be educated that they had been a part of this country for a very long time” and that they had “Hindu roots”.<sup>53</sup>

The RSS leader also defended his pro-Hindu stance and criticised the political adversaries of the emerging Hindutva clan by saying that the “Hindus do not need lectures on secularism. India is secular because the Hindus, who are in majority, have centuries-old tradition of *sarvadharmasambhav*. Deoras also asked the critics of the Hindutva idea to see for themselves what kind of secularism was practised in Muslim countries.” By late 1988, it was apparent that the RSS had come to dominate the Indian political scene in the Indian theatre, and this was being done by its leaders and through affiliates like the VHP, BJP and a number of other front organisations like the Bajrang Dal, which had mushroomed following the VHP decision to give a militant edge to the temple agitation. The sangh parivar was now slowly

becoming a visible reality with leaders of all organisations linked to the parent body working and voicing their views in tandem. The VHP also widened its plank from the issue of "liberating" the three shrines in Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi to the "broader question" of the "shape of things to come in India" when the Hindutva idea would hold sway.

This corresponded with the BJP firmly resolving to delink itself from the politics of JP, and return to the policies of the Jana Sangh a virtual echo of the RSS viewpoint. This was most evident in the virulence with which the BJP called for the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, and the arguments of several of its leaders that the riots that were breaking out in various parts of India had more with the Muslim leaders approach in "distorting history" and the government's inability to "make up its mind", than the VHP campaign. The VHP listed several of its new demands, including abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, checking "infiltration to India from Bangladesh and Pakistan, and repatriation of infiltrators to their respective countries."<sup>54</sup> The VHP also called for a Uniform Civil Code, ban on cow slaughter, "extermination with a heavy hand" of various fissiparous organisations, "complete ban on the inflow of financial aid to Muslim and Christian missionaries," and protection "at all cost, the security of the country and religion and culture of the Hindus".<sup>55</sup>

In an attempt to enlist the support of the Hindu clergy, the VHP also demanded the "annulment of the laws concerning government control of *maths* and temples".<sup>56</sup> This demand was a noteworthy shift from the earlier approach of the RSS to liberalise Hinduism, and had been a matter of contention between the organisation and the religious leaders who suffered financially, when the shrines were placed under the control of government-managed trusts. By incorporating demands made by religious leaders, the RSS was trying to draw the clergy into its campaign for the spread of the Hindutva idea. In later years also this approach of the RSS would continue. The clergy, in

tun, would respond by agreeing to the RSS view of making Hindu society less rigid, and not oppose the RSS's call to fight casteism and uplift low castes. For the RSS and others believing in the Hindutva idea, the greatest impediment was the schism within Hindu society, owing to the caste order which gave more privileges to the higher castes.

At a time when the advocates of the Hindutva idea were embarking on the twin strategies of broadening their plank arguing that the temple agitation was merely a part of a "broader struggle to give Hindus their due in their own country," and closing the ranks between the plethora of affiliate organisations, the non-BJP political parties were displaying their inability to foresee the emerging political scenario. The Congress still believed that the RSS continued to support it like it had in the 1984 general elections provided it allowed the VHP to continue with its agitation. The non-Congress opposition parties, in 1988, were more concerned with the election year approaching, and forging ties between various parties. They were also eager to enlist the support of the BJP as it had its own areas of influence. Throughout the run-up to the 1989 elections, the non-BJP opposition parties and the Congress made no attempt to discuss, even informally, the possible rise of the BJP as one of the strongest poles of Indian polity and on means to counter it. There were, however, a series of statements issued by leaders of the two communist parties and some other centrist parties, but there was no serious attempt in weeding out the BJP from the opposition front. Rather, the focus was on forging an electoral and strategic alliance with the BJP without being seen to be having one.

## **Rift Comes to the Fore**

If the forces behind the Hindutva idea started consolidating their position from mid-1988, the Muslim leadership started speaking in several voices as it was rocked by a series of personality

clashes. The traditional Muslim leadership resented the emergence of Shahabuddin as the virtual spokesman of the community, and disagreed with his approach of keeping the negotiating avenue open through Buta Singh. The contentious issue was the "long march" to Ayodhya. The BMMCC had met on May 22, 1988 and decided to organise a "mini march" by its leaders on August 12, 1988 and a "long march" by the community on October 14 the same year. Both the days decided upon were Fridays and the intention was that Muslims would march to the Babri Masjid on Friday afternoon and offer the customary *juma namaz* to affirm their right over the shrine. However, less than a fortnight before the first of the two marches, the BMMCC decided to postpone the march "in response to a call of the Home Minister for a negotiated solution".<sup>57</sup> The meeting was held on August 4, 1988 in the capital, but its decision was publicised four days later following dissensions within the ranks of the committee.

One of the harshest critics of the committee's decision to defer the march was the aging Imam of the capital's Jama Masjid, Syed Abdullah Bukhari, a one-time supporter of Indira Gandhi, who later gave a call in 1977 to Muslims to vote for the Janata Party to defeat the Congress. In a statement issued after he attended the meeting (he was not formally a member of the committee) Bukhari said that he was "bothered by something which happened at the meeting". What bothered him was that "at the last minute there was a letter from the Home minister and the purpose of that letter was to postpone the march."<sup>58</sup> The Imam argued that he would have acceded to the government request if it had acted on time and despatched the letter seeking a postponement, well in advance of the meeting of the BMMCC. But since Buta Singh had not done so, his actions were suspect and aimed at preventing the Muslims from taking to the roads.

Without naming Shahabuddin, the Imam charged that the former IFS officer had succumbed to government pressure in



agreeing to postpone the march. Bukhari said that he had "suspected that government pressure will be brought to bear the postponement or cancellation of the march...and the same happened".<sup>59</sup> These differences continued within the BMMCC as Shahabuddin was being perceived as a "stooge" of Buta Singh, and had "lost his earlier commitment to get the Babri Masjid restored to the Muslims."<sup>60</sup> This was in sharp contrast to 1986 when Shahabuddin was at the forefront of calling for the boycott of the Republic Day celebrations, while the Imam and some others had been lukewarm to the proposal. Viewed in hindsight, it is clear that the basic aim of all Muslim leaders was to further their political career, and emerge as the undisputed leader of the Muslims. The question of the "restoration of the Babri Masjid" was merely a convenient ladder in this rise.

However, the BMMCC decision to embark on a march to Ayodhya, caused the government some concern, as there were reports of an escalation in communal violence if the march was undertaken. The VHP had also made it known that it would "physically prevent" Muslims from going to the disputed shrine. The government was thus left with no other alternative but to try to speed up the process of negotiations. Right from the onset, it was evident that there was little meeting ground between the two warring groups, and the parleys were not destined to succeed. In these discussions that the government initiated, Shahabuddin and Ibrahim Sulaiman Sait a member of Parliament from Kerala and leader of the Muslim League, an ally of the Congress in the state emerged as important figures who articulated the viewpoint of the BMMCC, a fact resented by other members of the committee who felt that their close association with the Home Minister was slowly diluting their commitment to the agitation.

The march to Ayodhya was deferred primarily as a result of one such meeting convened by Buta Singh at which the two BMMCC leaders were present along with the Chief Minister of UP and Khurshid Alam Khan, a Congress MP and former Union

Minister. The basis on which the two BMMCC leaders agreed to postpone the march, was the "assurance given that the Centre and the state government would lend their good offices in the resolution of the issues and, take steps to expedite the legal process through the High Court to get a final decision in the matter in case a negotiated settlement does not come through."<sup>61</sup> While critics of Shahabuddin and Sait felt that they were allowing themselves to be "misled by the government", the duo argued that with the chances of a negotiated settlement were bleak, and the "best hope for the Muslims was to get the legal process expedited, as the Muslims were on the right side of history."<sup>62</sup>

But pressure was mounting on the government from within the Congress also. Buta Singh met Muslim MPs of the ruling party ten days after the postponement of the march to Ayodhya, and he promised that the government would initiate the process for a speedy settlement of the legal dispute, and would also move towards determining a "cut-off date in respect of ownership of religious places."<sup>63</sup> Two days later, on August 19, 1988, the BMMCC leaders met with Buta Singh at which the leaders made the following points:

- a) Idols should be taken out of the mosque
- b) A solution was not possible through negotiations as the hard-liners among the Hindus would not budge from their known stand
- c) Administration at the local level needs to be pulled up so that it becomes less partisan
- d) Muslims detained under NSA should be released

The government approach on the Ayodhya issue was that of an arbitrator, without taking a definite position of its own. This became clear in the subsequent days when Buta Singh invited the leaders of the Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti to talks in the capital on September 1, 1988. The proceedings of the meeting confirmed the contention of the BMMCC leaders, that there was little possibility of a settlement through negotiations because of the predetermined position on the question of historical reality of

the disputed shrine, and Ayodhya as the birthplace of Ram. The RJBMYs leaders made several points which were given a patient hearing by Buta Singh, of which the important ones were:

a) The question of negotiation does not arise as Ayodhya was one of the three most sacred places of Hindus

b) Scriptures and available historical evidence indicated that the shrine had been a temple and used as such over several hundreds of years

c) The 'chabutra' inside the complex indicated that it could not have existed in isolation, but must have been part of a larger older temple

d) Certain elements necessary in a mosque like minarets were not present in the structure and indicated that the shrine was not a mosque

e) Islam prohibited sharing of a mosque with other religions

The meeting amply demonstrated that there was little common ground between the two warring groups. No settlement would be possible unless the government took *suo moto* action as was being demanded by the communist parties, while other centrist political parties wanted the conversion of the disputed shrine into a National Monument, and handing it over to the Archaeological Survey of India. In 1988, the ground reality was such that if the Rajiv Gandhi government had opted to bow to this demand, the political scenario would have been markedly different from that which eventually transpired. Both the sangh parivar and the Muslim leadership would have been up in arms against the government decision, and would certainly have launched separate agitations. The target however, would not have been the other group or even people from the other community, but the State would have been seen then to be instrumental in the decision. The government would, undoubtedly have received support for its efforts to quell the agitations by the two groups. It may now appear far fetched, but, if Rajiv Gandhi had made the right moves at that time, he would almost certainly have been able to circumvent the political formation

that resulted in his ouster from office in 1989.

Sadly, Rajiv Gandhi did not have the political acumen to explore such a possibility. He still believed that his party would stand to benefit by bowing to certain demands of both the Hindu and Muslim chauvinists. It must also be borne in mind that neither the VHP, nor any of its affiliates had managed to convert the Ayodhya issue into a national dispute which dominated the political agenda of the moment. The focal point of politics in India in 1988, was still charges of corruption against the Rajiv Gandhi government. Moreover, the BJP was only a marginal political party and few, even within its own ranks, could have anticipated the dramatic growth it was poised to make. This debate however, is in the realm of conjectures regarding what could have happened if certain decisions had been taken. But, it is painfully evident that neither Rajiv Gandhi, nor any of his advisors had either the political foresight or the courage and conviction to act in any other manner but of managing a crisis. Indeed, the entire approach of the Rajiv Gandhi government was one of limiting the damage, seizing the initiative on the issue was totally *passé*. As we shall see later, this approach was favoured by successive governments also.

Meanwhile, continuing with its policy of keeping a facade that negotiations were continuing, and a settlement was not an impossibility, Buta Singh, in his meeting with the Hindu leaders, requested them to submit documents in favour of their contention to the ministry. He also met with the Muslim MPs from the Congress again on September 7, 1988 and heard their demand that an all-party meeting should be convened so that the "standpoint of different parties on this issue becomes clear."<sup>64</sup> These MPs also suggested that the government should initiate moves to secure the support of all Muslim MPs irrespective of party affiliations and issue an appeal to the two warring groups to "give up the confrontationist attitude." Very little however came out of this meeting as the recommendations were ignored by the government and the process of informal and formal talks

with leaders of the two groups continued. The VHP submitted a set of thirteen documents, as proof of their contention that a Ram temple existed at the site of the Babri Masjid. This was demolished by Babur to erect the mosque. The documents included the various versions of Babur, some revenue records and other legal reports which have been discussed in earlier chapters.

Buta Singh had yet another meeting with Shahabuddin, Sait and Khurshid Alam Khan at which the BMMCC leaders again reiterated their old positions that the "legal process be expedited as it was very unlikely that any common ground would emerge in view of the rigid stand of the protagonists of Ram Janmabhoomi."<sup>65</sup> The government nevertheless continued with the negotiations and forwarded the documents submitted by the VHP to Shahabuddin seeking his comments. The documents given to Shahabuddin on October 5, 1988 were promptly sent back the next day, with his comments that categorically rejected the VHP case. Shahabuddin, in his letter to Buta Singh contended that the documents did not "contain an iota of evidence on the two basic issues seen in a larger perspective: (a) Whether the Babri Masjid stands on the birth site of Shri Ramchandraji? (b) Whether a pre-existing temple on the site was demolished to construct the Babri Masjid". After arguing that each of the documents submitted by the VHP failed to conclusively establish its case, Shahabuddin said that the papers "do not take us any further. The onus still lies on the claimant."<sup>66</sup>

Meanwhile, the communal situation in several parts of north India deteriorated sharply. Hindu-Muslim riots had broken out in Muzaffarnagar and Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh. With the Muslim leadership going ahead with the plans to stage the "long march" to Ayodhya on October 12, 1988, the Chief Minister of UP feared that if the march was staged, "it would further aggravate the situation."<sup>67</sup> Faced with the prospects of fresh riots in several other parts of the state, the Home Minister convened another meeting with the BMMCC leaders and after promising to expedite the legal process "after the festival season" got over, Buta

Singh succeeded in getting the march postponed indefinitely. However, this posed problems for the leadership of the BMMCC as several Muslim leaders, led by the Shahi Imam of the capital's Jama Masjid and other Muslim leaders from Uttar Pradesh, accused Shahabuddin and Sait of having compromised the "lot of Muslims by striking a deal with Buta Singh."<sup>68</sup>

The schism which had been visible for several months now, came out into the open and on November 26, 1988 several Muslim leaders parted ways with the group led by Shahabuddin, accusing him of adopting dilatory tactics. At a two-day convention held in the Jama Masjid these leaders declared their intent of forming another organisation the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee and announced their resolve not to act in tandem with Shahabuddin. Several speakers at the meeting derided the former IFS officer for not being "sincere to the cause of the *quam*" and instead "having vested interests."<sup>69</sup> The convention was also noteworthy, as it saw the final elevation of Syed Ahmed Bukhari, Abdullah Bukhari's son and the Imam-designate. The *naib* Imam had been active since the mid-1980s and had even formed the Adam Sena a band of militant Muslim youth without much success after the Meerut riots. But, in November 1980, Ahmed Bukhari had all the makings of an assertive Muslim youth leader who minced no words when he criticised Shahabuddin.

With the Muslim leadership a divided lot, and other political parties failing to foresee the real intention of the advocates of the Hindutva idea, the VHP started planning new strategies which would ensure mass following and support for its agitation. This was recognised by Buta Singh who communicated to Rajiv Gandhi that a "noteworthy recent development has been a split in the ranks of the Babri Masjid activists and the formation of a parallel body, on the one hand, and the adoption of a more aggressive stance by the protagonists of the Ram Janmabhoomi on the other."<sup>70</sup> However, even at this stage the government strategy did not shift from the policy of continuing with the attempt to bring the two warring sides to the negotiating table

and manage the crisis by last-minute requests to the two groups. With the country preparing to enter the election year, the VHP organised a week-long Ram Janki Rath Yatra in the first fortnight of December 1988 in Madhya Pradesh, to "create Hindu awakening" over the Ayodhya issue. This was followed by yet another meeting between Buta Singh and VHP leaders, at which the Home Minister communicated to the VHP, Shahabuddin's response to the VHP documents.

The VHP leaders maintained at this meeting that questions of faith were beyond negotiation, and "need not be proved". The VHP position on the Ayodhya issue was one such, and the onus lay with the government to convince the Muslim leadership to give up its claim on the disputed shrine, and agree to it being handed over to the VHP for building a temple. The government made no effort to argue with the VHP that its approach was irrational and beyond the pale of law. Rather, it simply communicated the VHP sentiment to the Muslim leadership. Throughout the period of negotiations initiated at the behest of Buta Singh in the second half of 1988, the Union government at best functioned as a post box, where the two warring groups came and delivered their viewpoint. There was no attempt on the part of the government, to prepare its own position paper on the issue, and suggest a method by which the dispute could be resolved. This ambivalence of the government was motivated by its desire not to alienate any of the chauvinistic groups, and was prompted by the hope that if the feelings of the two groups could be assuaged, the Congress would get the electoral support from both the VHP and the Muslim leadership. That however did not happen, and was in fact, a theoretical improbability, but the Congress leadership did not have the political maturity to comprehend the complexities woven around the Ayodhya dispute. However, even at this stage the Ayodhya dispute had yet to become a raging national controversy even though several riots had taken place in India over the issue. The VHP which had made clear its plans to build a new temple after demolishing

the Babri Masjid, had not yet devised its future action plan. Similarly the Muslim groups were mainly concerned about preventing any action of the VHP, and were agitating only to keep the pressure on the government for speeding up the judicial process.

### Precipitating Matters

Two announcements on successive days by the two warring groups however, set the agenda on the Ayodhya front for 1989. The newly formed AIBMAC declared in the capital on January 31 that it was forming *hifajati dastas* or 'defence squads' for protecting the mosque from the attempts of the VHP activists to demolish it. The decision, taken at the end of a meeting, envisaged the formation of secret groups, who would be "trained adequately to sneak into the inner ring" of the shrine and "maintain a vigil" to prevent "assembly of VHP activists with the aim of demolishing the mosque."<sup>71</sup> The other decision was taken by the VHP at Allahabad where the annual *kumbh mela* was being held. Succeeding to huddle together a large group of Hindu religious leaders for a *sant sammelan* (conclave of Hindu religious leaders), the VHP announced its most ambitious programme till date. But even when the plan was unveiled on February 1, 1989 there were few to anticipate the lightning effect the programme would have in the growth of not just the VHP, but of the entire sangh parivar. The plan made public, included the decision to lay the foundation of the new temple at Ayodhya on November 9, 1989 on the occasion of the annual festival of *devauththan ekadashi* (a religious festival when the gods are supposed to have risen) in Ayodhya. The VHP also declared that to mobilise support for the foundation-laying ceremony, named *shilanyas*, another programme would be launched from September 1989. In this programme, called *shila puja*, specially prepared bricks with Shri Ram written on them, would be consecrated in several thousand cities, towns and villages following which they would



be transported to Ayodhya, in processions to be used later in constructing the temple. There were few to anticipate the lighting impact of the programme. However, one of the few who was able to foresee the likely impact was Shahabuddin who said that with "this programme, the VHP has ensured that it shall never have to look backwards on their road to Ayodhya."<sup>72</sup> The comment was prophetic, but by early 1989, the process of Shahabuddin's marginalisation had begun, and there were few to heed his warning.

By the time the sant sammelan concluded at Allahabad, the entire sangh parivar had started functioning like a well-oiled machine with each affiliate playing its part to perfection. The parent body, — the RSS — was preparing itself for the final stages of the Hedgewar birth anniversary celebrations, and was mounting the final campaign to canvass against the "continuous appeasement of minorities by previous governments," and on the need to forge Hindu solidarity. The BJP "after dabbling with secularism and Gandhian socialism for a while had returned to its original Hindu moorings". The BJP leaders were increasingly talking about the rise of the Hindu vote, and made no bones that they wanted to cash in on it. Atal Behari Vajpayee, who symbolised the secular facade of the BJP, declared that in the elections in 1984, "the Congress had played the Hindu card, but this time they are not going to get away with it; we are going to play it better". Vajpayee followed this comment made at Udaipur during a party session, with another more strident in tone. On April 2, 1989 while addressing a Hedgewar birth centenary rally in the capital's Ram Lila maidan "Vajpayee used all the slogans of RSS and declared that Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue is an election issue. Apart from voicing his support for virtual Hindu Rashtra (in the name of consolidating the principle of Hindutva) he issued a warning to the minorities to either give away their distinct identity, or face the worst."<sup>73</sup> However, even though the BJP leaders had been issuing statements supportive of the VHP agitation, it was yet to formally include the issue in

its agenda. The time was not yet ripe for such a move!

With the RSS canvassing for the Hindutva idea in a systematic manner, and the BJP projecting itself as the political articulator of the same ideology, the VHP, in 1989, was engaged in converting its temple agitation into "one of the biggest mass movements in independent India." By the end of the year, it was clear that the entire sangh parivar had been able to fulfil its objective when the BJP articulating the Hindutva idea succeeded in winning 88 parliamentary seats, a quantum leap from its earlier figure of 2. Barely twenty days before the elections, the VHP successfully completed the foundation-laying ceremony, after being able to assemble thousands of supporters at Ayodhya. This virtually forced the Central government to allow the ceremony when it saw that state violence would have to be unleashed, if the ceremony had to be prevented. By the time the election results were announced and as even BJP leaders expressed "surprise at the stupendous performance" of the party, it was clear that an issue, which had been considered peripheral by the majority of political forces in the country till some weeks ago, would come to dog the nation for several more years. The Hindutva idea was out in the open and it was clear that it was no longer merely the question of the shrine at Ayodhya. Rather, the moot point in December 1989, when the new Prime Minister V.P. Singh, was sworn into office, was the extent to which the Hindutva idea could be contained, and whether the bandwagon would stop at Ayodhya or would roll on to other towns where similar shrines had been listed by the VHP. The single most important factor that led to this spectacular growth of the organisations wedded to the Hindutva idea, were the twin programmes of shilanyas and shila pujan and the VHP had to be credited that it planned the two programmes in a meticulous manner, unmatched by any other political force of the time.

But, when the shila pujan programme was announced, it was considered to be farcical and ludicrous. The VHP announced that it would manufacture tens of thousands of bricks with Shri Ram

inscribed on them in several brick kilns in India from where they would be distributed to all villages, towns and cities in the country. Starting on an appointed day, the bricks euphemistically called Ram Shilas would be consecrated through a special religious ritual, in which the Hindus of the village or the urban locality, would participate. After the consecration ceremony, the bricks would be carried in processions to bigger collection centres, where bricks from the region would be gathered. From these local collection centres, the bricks would be carted to bigger collection centres in the zone and would later be transported in trucks, escorted by slogan-raising youth volunteers drawn from the Bajrang Dal, to Ayodhya. The VHP declared that the shila puja programme had been decided to "give a sense of belonging to the Hindus at large"<sup>74</sup> However, the response of both the government and other political adversaries of the RSS clan was not visible. While some ignored the programme when it was first announced, others derided and made a fun of it saying that it would end in a massive failure. Only Shahabuddin was consistent in his demand that the processions with bricks should not be allowed and banned. He also warned various non-BJP political parties but by the time they heeded, it was too late in the day and trouble had set in on a massive scale.

For the VHP, 1989 was a very important year as it was to complete twenty-five years of existence in August, the day when the birth of Krishna is celebrated by Hindus as *Janmashtami*. The year was projected by the leadership as the "take-off year for the VHP for expansion, growth and creating Hindu consolidation and energisation."<sup>75</sup> The agitation on the Ram temple at Ayodhya was seen as a programme whose "programme implementation offers the scope of being retained and converted to a permanent infrastructure".<sup>76</sup> The VHP leadership knew that the temple agitation would attract a large number of neo-converts to the sangh parivar fold, and unless special efforts were made to inculcate in them the value system of the RSS clan, they would begin to drift away. This plan would have "three pillars: 'Assembly regularity'; 'the temple'; and

the 'Dharmacharyas'."77

The first programme was a system to increase the interaction between the neo-converts and the traditional leadership as also others who had started believing in the Hindutva idea of late. It involved regular meetings with different timings and could be held in the "afternoon for ladies and night for men". The aim was to develop these assemblies as regular places for "children's *sanskar* (culture) activity, youth exercises, *satsang* (religious assemblies) and social service nuclear". Focus on the temple was meant to convey that "temples have been the forts of Hindu society's corporate existence". However, the problem, as seen by the VHP, was that some of them had "shrunk to worship function only," and it had to be "reversed". On the third programme the VHP noted with a certain amount of glee, that the "traditional recluses have now come into the towns and are leading the Hindu society. They have bypassed their individual differences, and identified the areas of common contribution for the well-being of Hindu society."78 Poised for a quantum growth, the VHP leadership was aware that it would not be able to get the support of a large number of Hindus unless the Hindu religious leaders were drawn into the organisation's fold which is why the VHP pledged that the religious leaders will be the "third pillar", of all programmes of the VHP in its silver jubilee year.

The VHP was also conscious of the fact that the rigid structure of Hinduism was a major impediment in the way of Hindu consolidation. This was the main reason why it had been campaigning among the religious leaders since 1982 after the Meenakshipuram conversions on the need to remove untouchability, and welcome the other lower-caste groups into the mainstream of the Hindu pantheon. This view of the sangh parivar's leadership was noted that "untouchability, row of caste and creed, dowry, etc, are facing eradication due to self-inspired and VHP-arranged consensus". With a daunting task chalked out for itself, the VHP also planned the organisational inputs required required to achieve the objectives. The network was

expanded by appointing VHP workers in "every *up-khand* (sub-area) and noting that such a vast network would require meticulous organisational backup, listing, documentations, registrations, and particulars of committee members and in-charge *karyakartas* (officials). Invitees' lists and mailing lists will be maintained. Visits, contacts, correspondences will require a high degree of promptness and regularity."<sup>79</sup>

The VHP also advised its cadre to eschew sectarianism by saying that other Hindu "organisations must be co-opted and VHP workers should collaborate with them". All activities of the VHP would have to be conducted in an organised manner, and each unit must ensure that halls are "made available in all districts where 200-250 people can gather". The leadership advised that if there were situations where the VHP could not organise the halls gratis, then they should even hire them. "The hall must bear the name board of VHP, to be used in the morning for physical exercise of youth, the *yoga-shiksha*, (training in yoga) *kendras* (centres) for adults, *sanskar kendras* (cultural centres) for children, for ladies in the afternoon and assembly in the night."<sup>80</sup> All these activities of the VHP were to be accompanied by "distribution of literature, stickers, pictures, lockets, etc". At one level it appeared that the VHP was gearing itself up for a virtual war, and was leaving nothing unplanned not even finding funds which the organisation's leaders said had to be "gathered". Such a high level of organisation, planning and preparedness was unmatched in the entire political theatre of India in 1989, and was instrumental in positioning the sangh parivar in a pivotal position by the end of the year.

With the organisation geared up, the VHP trained its sights on successfully launching the shila puja programme. An estimated four lakh bricks were manufactured in various brick kilns in India, and carted in small lots to various parts of the country. As the deadline for the launch of the programme grew near apprehensions were voiced regarding the possible fallout of the marches with the bricks. However, the government made

no effort to stop either the processions or the ritualistic consecration ceremony. Meanwhile, the VHP continued to list the support of most revered Hindu religious leaders for its programme. The organisation succeeded in enlisting the support of the Shankaracharya of Badrinath who performed shila puja at his Himalayan hermitage on August 27. This was followed by similar consecration rituals conducted by the Shankaracharya of Kanchi and several other important Hindu religious leaders. Shila puja was to start all over the country on September 30 and preparations started reaching a frenzied pace by the beginning of the month.

Regional organisers, drawn from the RSS fold and specially appointed for the programme, coordinated with each other and special efforts were made to make inroads in the southern states where the agitation was yet to gain ground. Reports of shila puja being done by Hindus living abroad also started pouring in. The international wing of the VHP had started functioning in an orchestrated manner, and the specially inscribed bricks started reaching the capital by the middle of September. They were first displayed to the media, and later kept at vantage offices of the VHP and taken out in processions through the city. Meanwhile, the demand of banning the programme was growing. There were also interpretations that the Allahabad High Court ruling on the question of maintaining status quo of the disputed shrine also prevented shila puja, a contention disputed by the VHP. Religious leaders were also enlisted by state level units to undertake religious marches through the cities and other towns to canvass support for the shila puja programme. One such was taken out in Delhi between September 17 and 22 which culminated at a large rally in the capital's Boat Club. Temple managers in all colonies of the cities were requested by the religious leaders to allow the shila puja ritual to be performed in the temples. For the rally on September 22, the VHP organised buses to cart the Hindus to the Boat Club and also solicited donations. Donations were also sought during the shila

pujan programme through the sale of specially printed coupons in denominations of Rs 1.25, Rs 5.00, and Rs 10.00. In this way it was ensured that every person who came to attend the consecration ceremony contributed at least Rs 1.25.<sup>81</sup>

The shila puja programme began on a cautious note on September 30 in what the VHP claimed five and a half lakh villages and localities in India. Another specially arranged ritual, Shri Ram Mahayagna, was also performed in 6,600 regional centres. However, with elections round the corner, trouble started surfacing as the bricks wended their way from villages to the collecting centres, and were later taken to the urban centres from where they were to head for Ayodhya. In the initial phases of the shila puja programme, people turned out primarily out of curiosity because such a religious ritual had never been witnessed by them. Ordinary bricks were being venerated, they were wrapped in the symbolic red silk scarves and vermilion marks were put on them. Offerings were made in front of the bricks and for the lakhs of devotees, who assembled in the temples where the rituals were being conducted, the bricks symbolised the temple at Ayodhya. This was true of even people who had never been to the temple-town they were however helped in their visualisation by the hordes of VHP activists who were present to ensure smooth completion of the consecration ritual. The activists were also to physically "escort" the bricks to the collection centres from the temples, where they were consecrated, and later take them to Ayodhya in specially hired trucks. The youngsters sported saffron bandannas and shouted aggressive slogans which were predictably resented by Muslims, especially as in several towns and cities, the route of the processions was finalised in a manner that ensured passage through a Muslim majority locality.

Prior to the launch of the shila puja programme there had been sufficient political din that warranted the government to institute action. The High Court judgment of August 14, 1989 was binding on all parties, more importantly the government, as it

had to ensure that status quo of the entire disputed property this included not just the Babri Masjid, but also several plots around it. The government was gripped with two problems: It had to ensure the rule of law and prevent violation of the High Court order, as any non-compliance of the judicial order would damage the image of the Congress in the election year. The ruling party also felt it could not politically risk any use of force against the VHP activists as it could potentially alienate the Congress from the Hindu voters. The VHP leadership on its part knew that it was in a winning position and as early as June 1989, it declared that there was no possibility of the programme at Ayodhya being deferred. Elections were declared in October, and even before its formal notification, the RSS clan anticipated it and realised that the government would not be in position to forcibly prevent the programme for fear of getting isolated from the Hindu voters. The responsibility of ensuring the successful completion of the shilanyas programme was thus with the government. It was the government's obligation to find a way out to declare the shilanyas ceremony a lawful one, that did not violate any judicial order. Efforts in this direction were made by Buta Singh from September 1989 itself. There however, is no evidence to suggest that he was acting on his own volition. All his actions were endorsed both by Rajiv Gandhi and P.V. Narasimha Rao in his capacity as the chairman of the cabinet sub-committee on Ayodhya.

Barely twenty days before the VHP was scheduled to kick off its shila puja programme, Buta Singh met with the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh to review the decision in the light of the High Court injunction of August 14, after the title suits were transferred to the Lucknow Bench of the High Court. A Home Ministry background paper which recorded the decision at this meeting underlined the inability of the government to take strong preventive measures to thwart the VHP programme. The Union Home Minister and the Chief Minister of the most populous state of India, concluded that the "best course would



be to impress upon the VHP not to force the issue as the matter was pending before the High Court."<sup>82</sup> This conclusion of the two Congress leaders on September 10, 1989 stands in contrast to the VHP contention that shilanyas ceremony was "not just to lay the foundation of the Ram temple, but of a Hindu Rashtra."<sup>83</sup> However, it suited the VHP to heed to the implorings of the government, provided the shilanyas ceremony was declared lawful. On September 27, 1989 Buta Singh succeeded in getting an assurance from the VHP that it would not violate the High Court order and would also seek the clearance of the local administration while taking out the shila processions, and that the organisation would agree to make changes if the proposed route jeopardised communal harmony.

The agreement reached at this meeting was duly signed by senior VHP leaders who attended the meeting. The Home Ministry paper makes it amply clear that the government had decided at that stage that the shilanyas ceremony could not be prevented and the best way out for it would be to allow the ceremony and argue that the High Court order was not violated. The note records the telling comment that at the meeting the "Home Minister indicated that there may not be any objection to the VHP programme," and that after the Central government made it clear that "it would not be averse to permit shilanyas in a controlled manner, the State government would review their strategy and action plan".<sup>84</sup> The Congress hoped that by permitting the shilanyas ceremony, it would be able to garner the Hindu votes by claiming to have ensured the foundation-laying ceremony. The ruling party also calculated that it could approach the Muslim electorate with the argument that it had protected the disputed shrine. In 1989, it mattered little to the government that the VHP programme violated the rules of the Ayodhya Special Area Development Authority the local body that is entrusted with the development of Ayodhya as a modern urban centre would be violated by the shilanyas ceremony, as the rules made it mandatory for any person or organisation to get the building plans approved from the ASADA,

before starting any form of construction.

One of the prime factors for the government's inability to prevent the shilanyas ceremony, and disallow the shila puja and the subsequent processions with the bricks, was the visible consolidation of the sangh parivar. It has been noted earlier, that the RSS clan geared itself up from the election year (from late 1988). The RSS was engaged in canvassing support for its concept of nationalism using the birth centenary of its founder Hedgewar. The VHP was busy in generating support for the shilanyas and shila puja programmes. By early 1989, the BJP had also pitchforked itself into a pivotal position in the anti-Congress political front. The party was sharing power in Haryana with the Lok Dal and from the beginning of 1989, its leaders also started articulating the demand of the VHP. The BJP which did not attend the Home Minister's meeting with the opposition leaders on March 29, 1989 "even though a request had been sent" to Advani, however, participated in the discussions on May 15-16, at which the BJP delegation informed Buta Singh, that it was sceptical of a judicial settlement, but had no disagreement with the attempt to reach a negotiated settlement. However, the most politically significant event in relation to the Ayodhya dispute took place on June 11, 1989 at a small town called Palampur, a hill resort in the state of Himachal Pradesh.

### **Adopting Ram**

The occasion was a regular quarterly meeting of the BJP executive to prepare itself for the ensuing elections, and by the time the three-day session concluded, the BJP had stated its political agenda and made it clear that in the election year, it would collaborate with other non-Congress parties, except the communist parties and Muslim League, to strive for the defeat of Rajiv Gandhi in the forthcoming elections. The BJP also made it clear that while it would work towards forging a joint anti-Congress front, but not strive to repeat the Janata experiment, and

would instead "maintain its distinct identity". This distinct identity of the BJP would be underscored by highlighting the party's "forthright denunciation of the pseudo-secularism practised by the Congress and other parties for the sake of bloc minority votes, and its unequivocal stand on issues like Article 370, Minorities Commission, Ram Janmabhoomi," which Advani argued had "earned the respect of millions in the country".<sup>85</sup>

Advani detailed his perception of the political situation in India in June 1989, and in his opening remarks contended that the executive session was likely to be the "last but one" conclave of senior party leaders before the elections. He added that it would be "appropriate to devote some time to evaluating the pre-election scene, and assessing the BJP's own preparations for the battle". The Rajiv Gandhi government had failed "on all fronts. Both in terms of competence as well as in terms of integrity, it is the worst government since Independence. The people, therefore, are longing for a change". However, Advani was also clear that the ouster of the Congress government was not the only goal of the BJP. The party president was also categorical in asserting that the other aim of the party was to "acquire a sizable presence in the 1990 Lok Sabha, so that whether in power, or outside, the party can play the role of the stabilising nucleus in Indian politics". Advani argued that the key in the forthcoming elections lay in northern, western and central India and the "parties which really matter in this region are the BJP and the Janata Dal". There was thus a need to forge an electoral relationship with the JD. However, there were problems because the JD was "not a single, homogeneous party. It is a condominium of diverse factions". What further complicated matters was that while some of the factions "appreciate BJP's role in Indian politics, and are keen to cooperate, some others can hardly conceal their animus towards us". Advani further cautioned his party colleagues that given the animosity of a certain section of the JD to the BJP, it had to "move ahead with cautious optimism," while working out an electoral

relationship with the JD.

In its effort to underline the BJP's different identity from other non-Congress parties, the executive adopted a formal resolution demanding that the disputed shrine at Ayodhya must be "handed over to the Hindus". In the first formal adoption of the Ayodhya issue in its political agenda, the BJP charged the Congress and other political parties with demonstrating "callous unconcern" on the "sentiments of the overwhelming majority in the country the Hindus". The Palampur resolution on Ayodhya contended that the VHP was right in claiming the shrine and held that the "nature of controversy is such, that it just cannot be sorted out by a court of law". The resolution made no effort to hide the BJP's notion of nationalism, and cited the instance of the government-aided repair of the Somnath temple after Independence in which Patel had played a crucial role. Patel was increasingly being projected by the BJP as the true nationalist in place of Nehru, who was considered to be responsible for the view that secularism in the 1980s "had come to be equated with an allergy to Hinduism, and a synonym for Muslim appeasement". Secularism, the BJP argued, could not mean a "rejection of our history and cultural heritage,"<sup>86</sup> and virtually contended that till the time the Ayodhya dispute remained unresolved to the satisfaction of the Hindus, the basic issue of the nature and content of Indian nationalism would remain a contentious issue.

The importance of the Palampur resolution on Ayodhya can be gauged from the fact that four years after the declaration, the BJP declared that the decision to support the VHP agitation was the "turning point" in the agitation for the Ram temple as by the "middle of 1989, the Ayodhya movement had reached a state and status in Indian public life when it was no more possible to ignore its effect in politics, including electoral politics".<sup>87</sup> The present assessment of the BJP is in contrast to the repeated statements of the BJP leaders during the 1989 elections and in the weeks following the results when they commented on the BJP's spectacular growth, when they repeatedly stated that the Ayodhya issue was not an

electoral one. However, the BJP contended four years after it formally adopted the Ram temple issue, that it was forced to join the agitation because of the "permanent avocation of appeasing Muslim leaders" by the Congress. The BJP incorporated the Ayodhya agitation into its agenda to "educate the public on how the Congress was taking an anti-Hindu stance under the veneer of secularism, to appease the communal Muslim leadership."<sup>88</sup>

Analysing the political developments in India after the BJP adopted the VHP agitation in its agenda, it is clear that all non-BJP parties failed to evaluate the likely impact of the Palampur resolution. None of the non-BJP parties concluded that for the BJP the "Ayodhya movement had become a powerful expression of the disapproval of the post-Independence distortion of national politics."<sup>89</sup> The Congress believed that it could limit the damage to its electoral prospects, if it could allow shilanyas and also ensure the protection of the Babri Masjid. Other non-Congress opposition parties also failed to take note of the developments on the Ayodhya front, concerned solely as they were with the twin issues of "corruption in high places" and ousting Rajiv Gandhi. In the political theatre of India in 1989, only the BJP was concerned about long-term developments, the other parties were not looking beyond the impending elections: The Congress presumed that it could get the votes of both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists; and the National Front was willing to ally with any other political combine solely to defeat the Congress. The communist parties articulated the danger of electorally allying with the BJP, but even they were enveloped by the desire to see the back of Rajiv Gandhi and did not stress on their view to isolate the BJP beyond a point. The result was that when the results of the November 1989 elections were declared it was evident that the Ram temple issue had emerged as the "central issue in national politics and set the political agenda of the nation in the years that followed".

The "phoenix-like rise" of the BJP was considered to be "as spectacular and significant, if not more, as the defeat of the

Congress"<sup>90</sup> in the 1989 elections. With 88 members in the new Lok Sabha, the BJP had nearly equalled the performance of the Jana Sangh in 1977, when the earlier avatar of the BJP had bagged 96 parliamentary seats. What made the results of the elections more heartening for the BJP was that unlike 1989, it was not a constituent of a political conglomerate, but had retained its distinct identity. It had spelt out its ideological orientation, and also highlighted that it was dissimilar from that of other political parties. It was clear that the BJP was sure to "play the role of the backseat driver to whoever occupies the driver's seat."<sup>91</sup> It had been known for several months before the elections were declared on October 17, 1989 that the BJP would do creditably in the elections "but even for the biggest optimist, the party's showing had come as a surprise."<sup>92</sup>

That the BJP had gained greatly from the Ram temple issue was evident, but it was apparent that the Ayodhya agitation was only the immediate emotive aspect of the BJP's political plank. The speeches by the BJP leaders during the campaign indicated that the Ayodhya issue was merely a part of a political perspective that would go on to question the legitimacy of the labels like secular, communal, and national. Commentators observed that the 1989 elections were as much the story of Rajiv Gandhi's fall from popular grace, as the growth of the BJP. The BJP had emerged on the scene after "consigning the pretentious jargon of the earlier period to the past, and metaphorically unfurling the flag of unapologetic Hinduism."<sup>93</sup> There was virtual consensus among commentators that the BJP had "at last caught up with its identity, spelling out its ideological position, without a trace of compromise and expediency".<sup>94</sup> It was argued by pro-BJP commentators that after "42 years of independence, the Hindu worn was turning, and wisdom demands that the Hindus' aspirations to be masters in their own country are fruitfully and constructively channelised".<sup>95</sup> The 1989 elections were also significant for the inroads the BJP made into hitherto non-traditional areas of support. The party had extended its support

base beyond the traditional support base of the Jana Sangh upper caste Hindu traders. The 1989 elections also led to another fundamental development that would be of great importance in later years: A large section of the intelligentsia, which had grown up in the Nehruvian model, started agreeing with the political articulation of the sangh parivar and the BJP found supporters in the 'intellectual elite' of the country. This support was to prove crucial in later years as it provided an intellectual facade to the machinations of the RSS clan.

However, the 1989 elections failed to provide a majority in Parliament to any of the parties. In the last week of November it was evident that the phase of coalition governments had started in India when the chairman of the National Front and Telugu Desam leader, N.T. Rama Rao, wrote to Advani seeking the support of his party in forming a coalition government of the Front. The BJP offered "general but critical support" to the government but not before setting some preconditions: The government had to realise that while there were some areas of agreement with the BJP, there were also sharp differences over issues like "Article 370, Human Rights Commission, Uniform Civil Code, etc," and that the "government should confine its governmental programme to issues on which we (the BJP and NF) agree". The second precondition was more direct: The Janata Dal, the "main constituent of the NF since its launching, has been consciously trying to convey to the people an impression that it regards the BJP as a communal party". This was not acceptable to Advani who demanded that the JD must declare that it does not "regard the BJP as communal and that would go a long way in removing the misgivings in our rank and file".<sup>96</sup> The BJP was demanding its pound of flesh in the form of political credibility, and for the new government matters appeared to be tough from the beginning propped up as it was from both the Right in the form of the BJP, and the Left in the form of the communist parties and its allies.

The support that the NF sought and secured from the BJP was

crucial to the BJP's emergence as a political force as it underscored the changed scenario where the party was no longer considered a political pariah. What made matters easier for the BJP and in reverse tougher for the NF and the communist parties was the fact that the BJP was less concerned with the stability of the government than the other two groupings. The BJP by now started having visions of coming to power at the Centre, and this was in contrast to the aspiration of the communist parties who were unable to look beyond the regional pockets of its influence. Even as the new government assumed office in the first week of December, it was apparent that the BJP would dictate terms to the government and if it did not meet the demands of the BJP, the support accorded to it would be withdrawn. Such a choice however was not available for the communists, who felt ideologically closer to the Janata Dal. The BJP had made great strides in a matter of months, and the single most important factor in this "phoenix-like rise" of the party was undoubtedly the twin programmes of shila puja and shilanyas.

The VHP secured the support of nearly one lakh Hindu religious leaders for the twin programmes, when they assembled at Allahabad for the annual *Kumbh Mela* in January 1989. The decision was made public on February 1 and later reiterated at another meeting of the religious leaders associated with the VHP agitation on May 28 after a two-day conclave. However, the government failed to visualise the impact of the twin programmes and did precious little except trying to assuage the VHP leaders by indicating that the shilanyas ceremony would be allowed provided the government could come up with a face-saving device, to claim that no judicial order had been violated by the programme. Buta Singh claims that the government was primarily concerned to somehow "save the situation," and he as Home minister in the crucial period was "trying to defuse the situation which had surcharged every village in the country".<sup>97</sup> By his own admission, Buta Singh admits that the shila puja had been a very successful programme and as the date of the



shilanyas programme approached, the government was in no position to prevent the programme as "there would have been a worse situation".

Singh concedes that the "sentiments of the people were worked up so hard at the time of shila puja, that even people who did not believe in religion Marxist households, their womenfolk performed shila puja". By failing to anticipate the developing situation, the government felt in November 1989 that there would be a "holocaust" if shilanyas was disallowed. There had been major communal riots in several cities and towns of north India most notably in Bhagalpur in Bihar, and in Bijnore in Uttar Pradesh. These riots had been sparked off during the shila processions, and the Home Ministry figures indicate that there was a quantum jump in the number of communal clashes in India after the launch of the shila puja programme on September 30. The VHP had another factor going in its favour: Even if the government mustered the political will to prevent shilanyas, it would find the situation tough to manage as elections were scheduled for November 20 and the majority of the security forces were posted all over the country to ensure the peaceful conduct of elections. However, the government neither had the political courage to take on the VHP, nor did it explore options of controlling the situation in Ayodhya and elsewhere. The government virtually threw in the towel, and Buta Singh was deputed to find a way out that allowed the government to claim that it had let "things happen according to the law of the land".

The conduct of the government in the weeks preceding shilanyas makes it clear that protests notwithstanding, the Congress hoped to garner the votes of the Hindus by allowing the programme. This is evident in the refusal of the government in preventing the programme even though it was armed with a resolution passed unanimously by non-BJP parties in the Lok Sabha on October 13, which stated that the government should not permit shilanyas, and VHP be "asked to cancel the

programme". The Congress approach was to argue with the Hindus that "shilanyas for their Ram temple has been laid, and also assuring that the Muslims were safe and intact. However, as the election results amply demonstrated, this did not happen and Buta Singh blamed it on the failure of the government in giving proper publicity" to the plan. The former Home Minister who has been charged of being instrumental in allowing the VHP programme, however denies the charge and says that he was implementing the decisions of the government including that of P.V. Narasimha Rao, who was chairman of the group of ministers on Ayodhya. Buta Singh also claims that he told Rajiv Gandhi that he was "prepared to tackle the situation by disallowing shilanyas provided the state government gives me full cooperation".

Subsequent to this note submitted by Buta Singh, Gandhi convened a meeting of Chief Secretaries along with the Home Secretary and the Directors General of Police of all states. This was followed by another meeting with state Chief Ministers. Buta Singh claims that the "sum total of these meetings was that no one was willing to take on this campaign of shila puja and shilanyas. Everybody said that it was beyond us, we cannot help...Then I sent a note to the Prime Minister saying that we can take them on and even stop shilanyas also. Unfortunately, there was a big no from the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh". After having foreclosed the option of trying to meet the VHP challenge by political means, the government was engaged in providing the shilanyas programme a semblance of legality. Buta Singh says that after it was decided to allow the programme, the government's "basic anxiety was to ensure that the High Court order was not interfered with". This became particularly important for the government after the VHP unilaterally selected the place where it intended to perform shilanyas on November 2, and hoisted a saffron flag at the site. The VHP immediately started mobilising its supporters to reach the place and take physical control before the administration decided to act and

attempt to cordon off the site. At that time there were few in the government who doubted the intentions of the VHP to violate the High Court order, but no one initiated action, and were primarily engaged in trying to convince the VHP to shift the selected site, and when that failed, a laborious exercise was undertaken to declare the site of shilanyas as undisputed and thus permit the programme. Buta Singh says that it was a "question of letting things happen according to the law of the land".

On November 6, some Congress leaders met with Devraha Baba, a Mathura based religious leader with considerable influence in the VHP. He was requested to shift the site chosen for shilanyas, but when he refused, the state government moved the High Court the next day to seek a clarification on its earlier interim order. The Court declared that status quo had to be maintained in regard to the entire property listed in the title suit adding that this excluded areas outside the limits of EFGH in the site plan lying before the court. Buta Singh visited Lucknow on November 8 and what happened subsequently is detailed by him: "We were in the midst of the elections, there was no force available to stop shilanyas. There was no other way (but to allow it). So I carried all the people concerned with me. The Babri Action people, the Court represented by the sub-registrar of the Allahabad High Court, the Advocate-General of the state, and we asked questions of the sub-registrar to ask him to clarify on the basis of revenue records. We had a map given to the Court by the Sunni Waqf Board. I spoke to the Prime Minister over the phone from there (Ayodhya) and only after he was satisfied that the land was outside the purview of the disputed land, did it happen. That is how it was done".

Buta Singh, however, makes no mention of the fact that the map on the basis of which the Advocate-General opined that the selected site was not a part of the disputed property, was not to scale and thus could not have been the basis for allowing shilanyas. No note was also taken that the shilanyas ceremony was cleared by the government without consulting the Ayodhya

Special Development Authority. The decision of the government to allow the VHP to complete the shilanyas programme was political, and taken with an eye on the electorate, but the Congress proverbially fell between two stools as the Hindus reposed faith in the BJP and the Muslims felt that the Congress had betrayed the community by allowing shilanyas. As far as the BJP is concerned, its evaluation of the situation leading to shilanyas is more realistic and closer to the truth. The party has asserted: "Despite the Allahabad High Court ruling on August 14 and November 7, declaring status quo on the disputed site, the Uttar Pradesh government and the Central government caved in, under mass pressure and could not stop the shilanyas."<sup>98</sup>

### Dictating Terms

The twin programmes that stirred the hornet's nest in India in 1989 were hastily cobbled up rituals. The consecration ceremony of the bricks was governed by a special booklet *Shri Ram Shila Gcetavali* of hymns<sup>99</sup> that the VHP published in July. The shilanyas ceremony itself entailed the digging up of the chosen site, and laying a few of the consecrated bricks to symbolically lay the foundation of the proposed temple. The date for the shilanyas programme was made to coincide with the festival of *Devuththan Ekadashi*, an annual festival when Ayodhya is visited by several thousand devotees to undertake a *parikrama* of the temple-town. This ensured that the VHP shall not be short of a crowd before which the shilanyas ritual would be staged. The VHP declared that the shilanyas was being performed at the place where the main gate of the temple would be. The ceremony started close to noon on November 9 and concluded the next day with a religious ceremony. Kameshwar Chopal, a Low-caste Harijan from Bihar was chosen by the VHP to place the first brick in the small pit. This was done by the VHP leadership to stress the need for Hindu solidarity cutting across caste lines a viewpoint, as highlighted earlier, that the RSS clan believed in from

its inception.

Prior to this, the small pit was dug up and as the land was a part of the graveyard where the Muslims killed in the clash of 1855 were buried, several pieces of bones surfaced during the digging. Watched by a several-thousand-strong cheering crowd, the frenzied VHP activists did an impromptu delirious dance waving the bones in the air. These VHP activists, a large number of them members of the Bajrang Dal and all neo-converts to the RSS clan's, had later declared that they would take the bones away to be kept and shown as evidence for having "started the process of undoing the historical wrongs by the Islamic invaders".<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, the administration complimented itself for having "managed the shilanyas without endangering peace". The VHP leaders in the evening claimed that what had been witnessed in Ayodhya was "not a simple ceremony to lay the foundation of a new temple. We have today laid the foundation stone of a Hindu Rashtra,"<sup>101</sup> VHP leader Ashok Singhal declared. While the bulk of the BJP leaders left the shilanyas programme to be conducted by the VHP, Vijaya Raje Scindia, party vice-president, oversaw the programme in her capacity as a patron of the VHP.

Buta Singh was not the only national-level politician to have visited Ayodhya in the days preceding the shilanyas. Veteran Congress leader Kamalapati Tripathi, Communist Party of India leader C. Rajeshwar Rao, V.P. Singh, Syed Shahabuddin all visited Faizabad, but did not go to Ayodhya. They returned after the local officers explained that the Babri Masjid was not threatened. All of them had failed to realise that the programme was a major watershed and would alter Indian polity greatly in years to come. However, local response to the VHP programme was lukewarm and on November 9, the communist parties held an election meeting in Faizabad. For all the strides the BJP made in the elections, the result from the Faizabad parliamentary constituency Ayodhya was a part of it was a rude shock to the party as it was won by a member of the CPI. The victory of Mitra Sen

Yadav, the CPI candidate, underscored that the BJP had still a long way to go before aspiring for power at the Centre. But, while the Faizabad result made the BJP redouble its efforts in the temple-town and the neighbouring areas, it lulled the non-BJP parties into complacency and in subsequent months Faizabad also started falling in line with the sangh parivar's political posture.

Predictably, the entire sangh parivar noted with satisfaction that the BJP had finally "come of age" in India. The RSS general secretary, H.V. Sheshadri, declared in an interview that the RSS had been stressing for several years that "it is the Hindus, awakened and made conscious of their national responsibilities who can give a healthy turn to the degenerated political culture. From this angle there appears to be quite a distinct improvement, which is reflected in the vastly improved position of the BJP."<sup>102</sup> In the course of the interview, the RSS leader was asked about the extent to which the Ayodhya agitation helped improve the BJP showing in Parliament. He did not wish to be drawn into a mathematical estimate, but said that the "process of Hindu awakening has been fast gaining momentum over the past few years. The Ram Janmabhoomi issue also added its own share to it. One of the major factors responsible for the BJP victory, is undoubtedly rising Hindu awareness". Sheshadri was also asked if there was a danger to the BJP from other parties that chose to adopt a Hindu posture after sensing the "mood of the Hindu electorate". The RSS leader argued that while the RSS would like all political parties to be "cured of the minority mania and formulating their policies in tune with our genuine national ethos. But mere championing of the Hindu cause as a political tactic to win the Hindu vote will not take them far". Sheshadri's views were important as his was one of the most influential voices within the RSS clan from the late 1980s following the illness of Balasaheb Deoras that largely confined him to Nagpur.

A day after the shilanyas programme, the religious leaders who had assembled at Ayodhya marched towards the Babri

Masjid to start construction of the new temple as the Marg Darshak Mandal of the VHP, had ruled the previous evening that "the natural culmination of the shilanyas programme was the construction of a temple."<sup>103</sup> The march was stopped by the local administration and the marchers did not lodge a protest but meekly dispersed. The move to march towards the disputed shrine was merely a ploy to keep the enthusiasm of the assembled crowd in check, and ensure that the people return to their homes to vote for the BJP. The VHP also declared that the next phase of the Ram temple agitation would be discussed at a meeting of religious leaders in Allahabad on January 27-28, 1990. The shilanyas programme had been the highest point in the road to Ayodhya till that time and the new government was aware that the problem was likely to surface soon at the meeting of the religious leaders, but like the previous government, V.P. Singh and his council of ministers also chose not to act till the meeting, and preferred to tackle other issues including calling for state assembly elections in several states of India. The inability of V.P. Singh to get a headstart over the sangh parivar proved to be his undoing in less than a year's time. From the time the VHP launched the Ayodhya agitation in 1984, the agenda on the temple dispute was consistently set by the RSS clan. This process had not been reversed even after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and amply underscored the inability of all governments, including the one headed by P.V. Narasimha Rao, of acting on time after evolving a cogent understanding of how to tackle the threat to the present character of Indian polity.

When the VHP activists dug up the graveyard in front of the Babri Masjid and after placing nearly two hundred consecrated bricks to symbolically lay the foundation stone of the proposed temple, nearly five and a half years had elapsed since the VHP had taken up the cudgels on "behalf of Ram to build a magnificent temple at his birthsite befitting his stature". What had appeared to be a peripheral agitation that had little potential of becoming a mass movement, had far greater support and had

played a decisive role in the 1989 elections. The Ayodhya issue was vying for a central position on the Indian political agenda with the controversy over the alleged kickbacks received by Indian politicians in the Bofors howitzer deal. The VHP which spearheaded the agitation had by 1989 been able to enlist the support of other front organisations of the RSS clan by projecting the Ayodhya issue as a central one through which the RSS ideology could be given greater acceptability. It was also becoming evident that the real intent of the sangh parivar was not to just oversee the successful construction of the Ram temple. Rather, the idea of Hindutva was the primary governing principle of the RSS, and its affiliates.

It was pointed out that by sheer coincidence, shilanyas was performed on the same day that the Berlin Wall was broken through. Several later ideologies sympathetic to the RSS have argued that there were strong similarities between the two acts: Both in Germany and in India historical aberrations were being rectified. Such comparison is far-fetched and indicates the commentators' admiration for the RSS ideology, dominating the desire to clinically analyse contemporary global events. However, there is no denying that the programme of shilanyas and the spectacular growth of the BJP in the elections heralded the emergence of a new polity in India. Unfortunately the message was lost on the majority of people not wedded to the Hindutva idea, and it was argued that the rise of the BJP was a passing phase as the VHP would be unable to sustain the agitation, and would peter out over time. None of the political adversaries of the RSS and its affiliates were able to view the developments of the 1980s in a holistic manner, and it was argued that the best strategy to counter the VHP and its allies would be to avoid taking any decision till the organisation announced its next step. There had been little shift in the approach of the government in tackling the Ayodhya agitation, and this benefited the entire sangh parivar.

The Congress government argued that shilanyas was allowed



as it was done according to law and at no point during the negotiations, did the question of construction come up. The government approach in resolving the Ayodhya dispute, has been detailed by Buta Singh and he says that the strategy was to allow shilanyas, after ensuring that the court order was not violated. The plan also envisaged speeding up the judicial process but it could not be implemented as the Congress lost in the elections. However, the Congress leaders were being myopic in considering that either of the two warring groups would accept the judicial verdict, if it went against them. The VHP and its allies had already made it clear that "matters of belief cannot be the subject matter of courts". The VHP also formally put it on record on October 19 in Lucknow, at a meeting of its senior leaders that the "*garbha griha* of the proposed temple shall remain at the place where Shri Ram Lalla's is placed at present," and that it would "welcome the shifting of the structure at present placed on Ram Janmabhoomi with utmost honour".<sup>104</sup> While the VHP never disguised its long-term intention, the government and other political adversaries of the RSS clan, were concerned with the immediate crisis in regard to the shilanyas and argued that the VHP had declared that "they have no intention to dismantle the structure of the present building".<sup>105</sup> Shilanyas was thus allowed, but the Congress lost out on the support of both Hindus and Muslims, and the behaviour of the electorate has been detailed previously.

However, in the weeks after the government headed by V.P. Singh assumed office, the euphoria in India was markedly anti-Rajiv Gandhi and the Ram temple issue had perforce to take the back seat. It was also the period for the BJP and other RSS affiliates to embark on a period of consolidation. The RSS clan had grown in a spectacular fashion in the six months since the preparation for the shila puja programme started in mid-1989, and there was a need to consolidate its rank or else there were chances that the neo-converts would return to the fold of the parties they had traditionally supported. In the Hindi heartland,

the traditional vote banks of the Congress had been the Brahmins, Harijans and Muslims for decades. This combination had been disturbed in the 1989 elections with the Muslims and Harijans opting for the Janata Dal and its allies. Some Harijans also rooted for the Bahujan Samaj Party which contested elections on a separate plank and projected itself as a party wedded to fight for the right of the Backward castes. The Brahmins had moved away significantly from the Congress to the BJP fold along with some other Backward castes. The immediate months after the elevation of V.P. Singh as Prime Minister, was also crucial to the BJP as it did not wish to acquire a negative image of a party that would not allow the government to function.

Advani's analysis of the political scenario following the elections was also succinct and indicative of the approach of the BJP. He said that 1990 was a "significant milestone" in Indian politics and "similar to 1977 in one respect, namely that both mark the ouster of the Congress and the installation of a non-Congress government at the Centre."<sup>106</sup> But the BJP leader also found dissimilarities in the sense that while 1977 "aroused hopes that the Indian polity was perhaps moving towards bi-polarity, 1990 has only confirmed that in India a neat two-party system is not feasible and we are in for a prolonged phase of multi-party politics."<sup>107</sup> Advani was also appreciative of the government's efforts to consult not just the BJP and the communist parties, but also the Congress, on various issues. He found it the "right thing to do," and committed to "extend critical support" to the government "but with firmness in so far as its own commitments to the people are concerned". Advani was making these comments after the assembly elections in several states in February, 1990 that had led to the formation of independent BJP governments in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh and a partner in the Janata Dal-led coalition government in Gujarat.

The task in front of the BJP, as detailed by Advani, was to ensure that the governments in the three states and the BJP Ministers in

Gujarat "must function in a manner and accomplish the development of these states so as to enhance the party's reputation all over the country". The BJP president also directed other organisational managers of the party that "grass-root activity by the party aimed at expanding the party's base geographically and socially must continue unabated; a conscious effort must be made to move eastwards and southwards". In the first half of 1990, the BJP was thus engaged in providing good governance in the states it was in government, and trying to consolidate the gains of 1989. This policy of the BJP was reciprocated by the VHP and other members of the RSS clan who did not precipitate the Ram temple issue till it politically suited the BJP. The decision of the VHP in the first half of 1990 to 'go slow' on the temple issue and in the later months give a new thrust was again indicative of the cohesion within the ranks of the sangh parivar and it was contrasted by the internal bickerings within the Janata Dal and inactivity on the part of the Congress.

## Repeating Follies

The National Front government did little at a formal level on the Ayodhya dispute in the first month after assuming office. The VHP, while asking its activists to return from Ayodhya on November 11, 1989 had announced that the decision to start construction of the temple would be taken at Allahabad on January 27-28, at a meeting of religious leaders owing allegiance to the VHP. The government however, made no effort to establish direct contact with any of the agitating leaders. Instead, V.P. Singh, the Prime Minister, declared a fifteen-point programme to improve the lot of the religious minorities in India. Syed Shahabuddin, whose marginalisation among Muslim leaders was almost complete he had floated a virtual one-man political party called Insaf Party in 1989, after failing to find place in the new conglomerate, and lost heavily in the elections while welcoming the action plan on January 5, 1990, pointed out that the plan missed out on promising a "settlement of the Ayodhya

dispute and enactment of a legislation to protect status quo of all places of worship as on August 15, 1947.<sup>108</sup> Shahabuddin also reiterated his earlier demands including granting of statutory status to the Minorities Commission and the publication of the Gopal Singh report on the status of minorities, submitted in June 1983 to the government, but had not been made public by the Congress government.

Even though nothing was initiated at the governmental level, non-governmental efforts to resolve the Ayodhya issue began with silent government appreciation. Acharya Sushil Muni, a Jain religious leader with political aspirations of sorts, succeeded in cobbling together a National Peace Negotiating Committee to resolve the Ayodhya dispute. The committee was formed on January 14 and the Acharya announced that members would meet in the capital on January 21, and visit Ayodhya two days later to ascertain the situation at the disputed shrine. The Jain leader had sent out missives to the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, and other Hindu religious leaders including some significant personae connected with the VHP agitation. He specifically requested the Imam to nominate members on the committee, thereby according him the status of the unquestioned Muslim religious leader. Done with the tacit approval of the government, this marked the near complete sidelining of Shahabuddin vis-a-vis the Central government. Throughout its term in office, the National Front government made little attempt to enlist the support of the former IFS officer in any of its initiatives. Rather, it worked towards projecting a new 'ginger group' among the Muslim leadership as they were personally loyal to V.P. Singh in contrast to Shahabuddin who continued to have close ties with Singh's arch rival in the Janata Dal, Chandrasekhar.

The committee also had members from the Buddhist, Christian and Sikh communities. The VHP asked Sushil Muni to attend the conclave of religious leaders at Allahabad, and he agreed before jetting off to Moscow to attend a meeting of the 'Global Forum of

**Parliamentarians and Spiritual Leaders for Human Survival.'** When the committee was constituted, there was widespread scepticism regarding the possible success of the group to thrash out a compromise formula. The scepticism stemmed from the fact that the committee had no member from the VHP or any of its affiliates, while the Babri groups were represented by a strong contingent. This gave the option to the VHP not to accept any compromise formula, which emerged at the end of the deliberations of the committee. There was also the added issue of imbalance in the committee, in so far as the Hindu members were predominantly religious leaders, while the Muslim members on the committee were either political or social activists. Shahabuddin, who had not been included in the list of the Imam's nominees, pointed out the surprising omission of VHP leaders but extended his "best wishes." He hoped that it would be able to "issue an appeal to the VHP, not to precipitate matters" during the Allahabad conclave and defer construction plans till the committee completed its deliberations, "or till an amicable settlement is reached or till the title is determined judicially".

However, neither Sushil Muni, nor the committee succeeded in making the VHP relent for the moment on its temple construction programme, as the Hindu religious leaders declared at the conclusion of the two-day *sant sammelan* that the construction programme would be resumed from February 14. But, there were indications that the declaration was a tactical ploy, as the VHP also said that the decision not with standing, it was open to negotiations with the government. With assembly elections in several north Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh, the RSS clan could ill afford to divide attention. If the VHP went ahead with the plan to start constructing the temple, it would lead to the twin problems of forcing an early confrontation with the government, and also lead to a paucity of cadre to campaign in the elections slated for the last week of February. However, there was also a danger of the neo-converts reverting from the VHP fold if the programme was deferred. But, the sangh parivar opted

to take a calculated risk and sent out signals to the Prime Minister, that a postponement was possible provided he intervened personally. At that time, the VHP was also smarting under allegations of stashing away funds abroad.

As a result V.P. Singh requested a meeting with some leaders connected with the Ayodhya agitation, and at the conclusion of the first meeting on February 6, asked for some time to enable him to consult his colleagues in the government. A second meeting was scheduled for February 8, at which the Prime Minister sought a four-month moratorium on the construction programme and promised in return, that a solution to the vexed dispute would be found in this period. It was predetermined that the request of V.P. Singh would be acceded to by the VHP, but a formal resolution to this effect was passed by the VHP the next day and the decision was made public. The government had been able to secure breathing time, but this was not because of shrewdness on the part of the Prime Minister. Rather, it suited the advocates of the Hindutva idea to further the political prospects of the BJP in the assembly elections. Finally when the results of the assembly elections started trickling in, BJP leaders who monitored the party headquarters in the capital, found it "hard to believe themselves". The BJP secured majority on its own in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, and in Rajasthan and Gujarat it had a working majority with its electoral ally, the Janata Dal. The BJP formed the government in the first two states and headed a coalition government in Rajasthan, while in Gujarat it became the junior partner in the coalition.

The temporary respite on the temple front acquired, the government became complacent and it was nearly two months before the first formal decision to resolve the issue was taken, when a committee of Ministers comprising Madhu Dandavate, George Fernandes and Mukhtar Anees was formed on April 5, to explore various options to settle the dispute by soliciting views formally and informally of various groups involved in the dispute.

This had been preceded by periodic reminders to Singh by the VHP leaders who pointed out to him at meetings that the four-month moratorium was running out. Even in the initial stages of the National Front's tenure it was clear that the Janata Dal was beset with a host of internal problems the main one being the inability of a bunch of politicians of differing views and overriding political ambitions, to sink differences and work towards strengthening the fledgling party. If Rajiv Gandhi had ignored the Ayodhya issue during his tenure, V.P. Singh failed to find a way to resolve the crisis, as he was caught up in coping with the threats to his leadership from within the Janata Dal. The other main preoccupation of the government was to unearth the extent of corruption in the Howitzer deal, which the National Front rightly concluded was the prime reason for the electorate voting out the Congress.

The BJP too carefully added to the complacency of the National Front by consciously steering clear of the Ayodhya dispute, during its executive meeting in Calcutta. In his opening address at the session in the first week of April, Advani merely noted the fact that the BJP session coincided with its tenth 'birthday', and that the party had grown considerably since its launch in Delhi in April 1980. The issues that Advani highlighted in his address did not include Ayodhya, but listed the problems in Punjab, Kashmir, and Assam as the "three issues which are going to provide the people with an acid test for judging the government's failure or success".<sup>109</sup> Advani also indicated that his party had little problem with the number of political parties that were present in the centre-stage of the Indian political theatre. He said that "let the coming years be of healthy competition among these divergent political parties as to who can serve the people best...Let political Cassandras who have always viewed multi-partyism as a synonym for instability and uncertainty, be proved wrong. This new phase of multi-party politics can turn out to be highly invigorating and health-giving for Indian democracy. The BJP on its part is determined to strive for

this".<sup>110</sup>

The decision of the VHP to postpone the plan to start construction of the temple and the absence of any Ayodhya-related rhetoric at its executive meeting, was interpreted by the political adversaries of the BJP as a sign of the party's realisation that it had exhausted the 'Hindu card', and had no option but to play the role of a responsible political party that could also govern the states in which it was in power. The critics of the BJP argued that the party was trying to make a transition from a party which had perfected the art of agitating to one which could also govern the Central government if given a chance by the electorate. These arguments got a further fillip from the observation of Advani that in the assembly elections, "the Ram Janmabhoomi issue was just not there".<sup>111</sup> While Advani and the other BJP leaders went on to interpret this fact as a sign that the support base for the BJP was not restricted to just the Ayodhya issue, but extended to other issues highlighted by the BJP, the political adversaries of the BJP argued that the confession suggested that the BJP was now groping for issues besides the Ram temple imbroglio. While some portions of these arguments were true, it is incorrect to say that the temple agitation was put in the back seat because of the movement having run out of steam. As has been seen earlier, the decision to defer construction plans was taken mainly for tactical reasons to consolidate the gains of 1989, and also of course to experiment with power in the states where it was in government. It was also the classic theory of a low point following a high point. The high point had been shilanyas and the subsequent elections, and the low point had to follow. In this period preparations were made for a bigger assault on Ayodhya, and the Indian polity as it existed. The Hindutva idea was greatly honed in this period. However, the quiet work done by the sangh parivar was perceived by its critics as a sign of the RSS being caught in "games of its own making".<sup>112</sup>

One of the "games" that the VHP was trapped in were charges that it had collected huge amounts of money during the shila



pujan programme, and that they were stashed away in banks outside the country. The controversy had erupted in the second week of February, when a Congress general secretary, K.N. Singh, charged the VHP with having collected Rs 700 crores of which Rs 300 crores was stashed away in banks abroad. Just as the controversy came to the fore, the Home Ministry also recorded that in 1989, the VHP had organised a lecture series for an America-based NRI academic couple. The Ministry recorded in its noting that the couple addressed several meetings on Hindu renaissance, and how Westerners were slowly getting attracted to the Hindu way of life. During this visit, the academics informed the VHP that funds had been collected for building the temple during the shila puja programme in the USA, and requested them to find out some means by which the funds could be transferred to India. However, this was not done and when the charge was leveled in February, the VHP was forced to go on the defensive and publicise the details of the money collected during the shila puja programme in India. The working president of the VHP, Vishnu Hari Dalmia, declared that Rs 8.25 crores had been garnered during shila puja of which Rs 1.60 crores had been spent on making arrangements for the twin programmes. The controversy faded away soon but the dirt stuck, cementing the feeling in certain sections of the National Front, that if given a long rope, the VHP and the other RSS affiliates would hang themselves.

However, it was not just the sangh parivar which was perforce being asked to face embarrassing questions. Crisis was slowly building up within the Janata Dal, and dissensions that had been apparent from the time of its inception in 1988, started coming to the fore. The National Front government also had the reputation of being one of the most porous of all Central governments, as there were few behind the scene informal meetings, the details of which were not withheld from the media. The first major clash in the Janata Dal came on the issue of allegations of rigging of elections during an assembly by-poll, in the state of Haryana.

The constituency in question was Meham which had been vacated to facilitate the eldest son of Devi Lal, Om Prakash Chautala's, election to the state assembly to enable him to continue as Chief Minister, the office to which he was elevated after his father joined the Central government as the Deputy Prime Minister. There was widespread violence in Meham on the day of the elections, and there were demands that Chautala should resign and allow the election of another Janata Dal leader as Chief Minister. The matter came up for discussion at the highest party forum where a similar demand was voiced, but the father-son duo refused to oblige and threatened to split the party if other leaders insisted. Chautala continued as Chief Minister, but the issue left cracks in the Janata Dal edifice and from that time it was just a question of time, when various forces allergic to V.P. Singh's style of governance would work in tandem, to bring about the fall of the government.

From the time of its inception, V.P. Singh's sharpest critic within the party had been the former Janata Party president, Chandrasekhar, who considered Singh a rank opportunist and resented the fact that he had to take the back seat in the new political conglomerate. While Devi Lal had been one of the foremost supporters of V.P. Singh and had been projected as the patriarch of the new party, he came in handy for Chandrasekhar after the controversy over the Meham by-elections. Further egged on by the Congress and at least one major industrial house, Devi Lal was at the forefront of rocking the National Front boat and made every effort to ensure that vital government information was either passed on to the people opposed to V.P. Singh, or the attention of the government was diverted from the real issues to the basic question of survival. While the Janata Party experiment in 1977 had witnessed schisms surfacing only after a while, the Janata Dal was facing problems from its inception, and it was only a matter of time before the political adversaries of V.P. Singh, both inside the party and outside, would attempt to ground it. By the summer of 1990, various political forces had

started positioning themselves in places from where they could play a pivotal role, when the crisis in the ruling combine crossed the threshold.

### Confusing Signals

The four-month moratorium on the Ayodhya agitation that the Prime Minister had sought from the VHP, expired in the first week of June without any significant headway except informally ascertaining the views of leaders involved in the dispute. This was the consensus in the meeting between the VHP leaders and V.P. Singh, held on June 8. Subsequent to this, the VHP convened a meeting of its Kendriya Margdarshak Mandal in the religious city of Haridwar. The religious leaders owing allegiance to the VHP, met on June 23-24 and while declaring that it was "agreeing to keep its door open for any dialogue,"<sup>113</sup> announced a detailed programme leading to the starting of construction of the Ram temple on October 30, a day that once again coincided with the festival of *Devuththan Ekadashi*. However, the VHP made it clear that there would be no compromise on the issue of the location of the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. It was to be where the idols were placed and "under no circumstances it can be changed."<sup>114</sup>

The VHP was also firm in asserting that the building plan of the proposed structure would be the same as that of the model developed by an Ahmedabad-based architect, Chandrakant Sompura. When the hundred-odd religious leaders dispersed from Haridwar, the VHP sent out confused signals to its cadre the door of negotiations had been kept open, yet the detailed programme had been chalked out. For many of the neo-converts to the Hindutva fold, the VHP and other affiliates appeared no different from other political parties who indulged in double talk. The VHP was criticising the government, but the BJP was handing out certificates that the government was "moving in the right direction".<sup>115</sup> In June it appeared that the VHP threat to

start construction would not be carried out and that the programme would be replaced by a ritualistic ceremony to mark the first anniversary according to the Hindu calendar of shilanyas, after it succeeded in using the good offices of the BJP, to secure another moratorium on the Ayodhya dispute.

However, the resolutions that were adopted at the two-day meeting were significant, as they were indicative of the basic fear of the VHP and others in the RSS clan a division in the ranks of the Hindus. One of the resolutions noted that the Hindus had been greatly united by the Ayodhya agitation, and the twin programmes of shila puja and shilanyas. "It is our sacred duty to maintain the unity achieved," stated the resolution. The fear of schism surfacing among the Hindus was on two counts religious leaders with conflicting interests clashing with each other, and the inherent problems posed by the rigid caste order. Thus the VHP appealed to the religious leaders that "forgetting all their internal differences they should unite" to make the Ayodhya agitation a success. The practising Hindus and neo-converts were advised to "first of all forget all our internal differences and project the Hindu society as an impregnable fort". There were also indications of the emerging situation when the resolution claimed, that "those elements who are benefited by the disintegration of Hindu society, have again started their conspiracies". The VHP session was also significant because of the strident criticism of the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav. He was attacked for his decision to induct Azam Khan, a member of the Babri Action Committee, in his Ministry, and for his repeated statements that the state government will not allow construction of the proposed temple to begin in violation of the court order. Yadav was accused of being "most irresponsible" and his assertions were an "open violation of all national values". Yadav was the third 'hate symbol' that the VHP started to project after the Babri Masjid and Babur.

The detailed national-level and provincial-level programmes that were chalked out in Haridwar, introduced the concept of

kar seva or voluntary service. Essentially a Punjabi phrase, it had been traditionally used by Sikhs in the repair of damaged gurdwaras, most recently in Amritsar after Operation Blue Star of 1984 when militants were flushed out from the Golden Temple by the Indian Army. For the VHP, however, kar seva in 1990 meant simply being in Ayodhya and cocking a snook at the state machinery, and those who headed for the temple-town were kar sevaks. To broadbase its organisational structure, the VHP announced the formation of Shri Ram Kar Seva Samitis structured in four tiers from the central level to the local neighbourhood level. These committees were to be formed in August and the kar sevaks would be "selected" for going to Ayodhya. The processions heading for Ayodhya were to be started on September 29, the day of Vijay Dashami. In order to further widen the appeal for the Ram temple, the VHP also announced the formation of *Sankirtan Mandals* in "each and every village and town throughout the country". These committees were entrusted with the task of organising daily Ram Bhajans and using the local temples by penetrating the managing committees and publicise the VHP programme to the devotees who came to offer prayers. The VHP leadership asked its cadre to ensure that the "entire atmosphere of Bharat should be surcharged with only *Nam Sankirtan* (name evocation) of Bhagwan Shri Ram, so that all obstacles in the construction of the Shri Ram Mandir may be removed, and we may achieve our objective". The details of the programme announced at Haridwar were to be reviewed and finalised by prominent religious leaders at Vrindavan near Mathura on August 1. At the conclusion of the Haridwar meeting, it was clear that the RSS clan was preparing its war machinery for the second year running. However, this time it was keeping its options open, in choosing the date of assault.

In the summer of 1990, the entire Indian nation was in the grip of a drama of another kind. The television serial, *Maahabharat*, produced in the soap opera style, was drawing to a close, and there were few who preferred to miss the episodes beamed

every Sunday morning. Even as the serial came to an end on July 8, yet another Mahabharat seemed to be in the offing, but this time in the Janata Dal. Battle lines were clearly drawn in the party, and the Meham issue refused to die. Devi Lal was being egged on by various politicians and other people, keen to see the end of the National Front experiment. By the end of July, it was clear that a parting of ways was inevitable between Devi Lal and Chandrasekhar, on the one hand and V.P. Singh on the other. The Congress also was playing a role in widening the gap between various Janata Dal factions, and there was also open collusion between the political forces opposed to V.P. Singh and executives of a large industrial house who had no love lost for Singh, from the days he had been Finance Minister under Rajiv Gandhi.

The period witnessed intrigues and secret conclaves between people formally on different sides of the fence. However, what kept the Janata Dal together, was ironically a law that was enacted by Rajiv Gandhi after his ascendancy to power. The Anti-Defection Act which was pushed through by the Congress government, prevented any member of Parliament from resigning from the party, if he or she wished to retain the status of being a parliamentarian. Since the Janata Dal rebels were not keen to attempt mustering the required one-third of the parliamentary party to effect a split, an uneasy situation prevailed within the main constituent of the ruling front. The Janata Dal, since July continued as a single party only in name and not in spirit various faction leaders convening meetings to demonstrate their strength. One of the most important of such calls was given by Devi Lal, who called a public rally at the capital's Boat Club for August 9 to challenge V.P. Singh. The motivating idea for staging the show of strength was to demonstrate to Singh that he had been elected Prime Minister because of Devi Lal's machinations, and could not continue in the same position by earning his ire.

Sensing that the government was embroiled in internal contradictions, the RSS clan opted to continue to prepare its cadre

for a showdown at Ayodhya. The BJP too at its executive meeting in Madras in the last week of July noted the "damage caused by the Chautala affair"<sup>116</sup> to the Janata Dal and asked the main constituent of the ruling front to put its house in order. Advani also reacted to a nascent move spearheaded by some Congress leaders and a few from the Janata Dal, to form a national government minus the BJP. Talking about the possible realignment on such lines, Advani stated that "if any realignment does take place which makes the BJP an opposition party, that need not bother us at all. Our present role is extremely difficult, and the role of an opposition party would be far simpler and for the party's future prospects, much more advantageous".<sup>117</sup> Advani also said it was a "matter of regret" that the government had not responded to the VHP decision to give him four months to resolve the Ayodhya dispute, and had made no "meaningful move in the matter". The BJP leader also warned V.P. Singh that a "casual approach in the matter can prove costly". However, even at that stage, the BJP was nowhere near precipitating the Ayodhya crisis in the manner in which it finally did in subsequent months.

However, the pressure was kept on the government at the meeting of religious leaders at Vrindavan on August 1 when another programme to widen the base of the agitation and raise emotions to a feverish pitch was announced. Swami Vamdev, the Vrindavan-based religious leader, was appointed the president of the All India Shri Ram Kar Seva Samiti, and he declared that a specially consecrated torch would be lit at Ayodhya on September 19 which was to be euphemistically called *Ram Agni*. Several more torches would be lit from this torch, and would be carted to zonal centres from where they would be further multiplied and taken to villages and towns. These torches were called *Ram Jyotis* and on the day of *Deewali*, people would be asked to come to the village or town centre to light a torch to be taken to their houses. The programme envisaged processions by groups of more than twenty-five VHP activists armed with the burning

torches, and had the potential to literally put the country in flames. Predictably, there was a chorus of protests at the VHP programme, and the Prime Minister was petitioned to ban the processions with the burning torches, but the demand was not acceded to by the government.

The religious leaders also asked the Hindus to celebrate Independence Day that year by hoisting saffron flags and blowing conch shells in their houses instead of participating in any government-organised function. By this time, the VHP and its allies had perfected the art of using traditional Hindu symbols for furthering the Ayodhya agitation. From this time onwards, the colour saffron became synonymous with the Ram temple and the Hindutva idea. The slogans of this period were markedly more aggressive than before, yet there was no sign of the impending crisis on the Ayodhya front that gripped the government specifically and the country as a whole in October. The decision of the RSS clan to embark on a path that jettisoned the National Front government had more to do with the decision of V.P. Singh to implement a long pending recommendation to reserve government jobs for the Backward castes. The decision had been primarily taken by V.P. Singh to quell the growing internal dissidence as also to chalk out a permanent social and electoral constituency for himself and his party.

### **Caste Fissures to the Fore**

The reaction to V.P. Singh's sudden decision was called 'Mandal mania' by a large number of commentators. Cities in several parts of the country were brought to a grinding halt, as agitating students protested against the Government's decision. Buses and trains were stopped and burnt, and other public property destroyed as waves of anger swept India. Spontaneity was the order of the day, and no political party of significance could come out in open support of the agitating students. The BJP was worst hit as the agitating students belonged to the primary social



group, that owed allegiance to the party. Its leaders were accosted by angry mobs as they tried to douse passions, and they were repeatedly asked about their inability to criticise the government action. At the end of the first month of the mayhem sparked off by the decision of V.P. Singh, scores of students had either immolated themselves or had had a close shave with death, following an attempt to set fire to themselves. There had also been clashes between students who supported the action, and those who were opposed to it.

V.P. Singh had in fact done precious little but to implement what various political parties had been promising, for more than a decade. One of the legacies of the Janata Party government, at the heart of the contentious conflict, was a report presented to the government by a commission to study the situation of the Backward castes, and recommend changes in the existing government laws to better their lot. The commission headed by a Bihar politician Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal, submitted the report which among recommendations asked for reserving 27 per cent of the government jobs, for the wards of the Backward caste families. This was to be in addition to the existing reservation of twelve and a half per cent, for the members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The report submitted in the early 1980s, however, had not been implemented, though it had been a promise in the election manifesto on several occasions. The promise had also been made in the National Front manifesto but, as had been the past tradition, there were few party leaders besides the committee appointed to draft the manifesto, who took the promise seriously. The policies of all governments had been guided more by realpolitik than idealistic convictions of fulfilling electoral promises which were generally made to be forgotten, after coming to power.

India woke up on August 8, 1990, a day before the grand support rally for Devi Lal was to overrun the capital, to the news that the National Front government had decided to implement the Mandal Commission report. The decision was clearly taken

with the aim of chalking out the Backward castes as the electoral base by, V.P. Singh. Faced with growing internal dissensions, Singh took the most controversial decision because he knew that it would be difficult for most politicians and political parties to criticise the action, as the Backward castes constituted the majority of Hindus, and were vote banks of significance in several parts of north India. The situation was markedly different in the greater part of southern India, where caste conflicts had been resolved in favour of the Backward castes several years ago. Upper caste college students in the capital were the first to take to the streets, and they forced the closure of educational institutions. Several government offices were also closed, as commuting became difficult following large-scale attacks on various modes of public transport.

Private vehicles were also attacked by spontaneous student organisations opposing the Mandal award and people chose to stay indoors. In Delhi, the first of the immolation bids was by an awkward-looking hitherto apolitical Brahmin student, Rajiv Goswami, who later went on to become the president of the Delhi University Students' Union, by riding the crest of a sympathy wave. Throughout August, there was little else which made it to the headlines. If Upper-caste students agitated and burnt themselves and public property, students from the Backward castes slowly started organising themselves, and taking out demonstrations in support of the government decision. At places where the two groups came face to face, there were also instances of clashes between them. From a state of social tranquillity disturbed only by the political drama within the Janata Dal, India was soon drawn into the vortex of caste conflicts, and all issues appeared to be of lesser importance. Restoring social peace was the main concern of all, and for a moment it appeared that V.P. Singh had been able to win the day, by merely underlining the contradictions within Hindu society.

The decision to implement the Mandal commission report, silenced the critics of V.P. Singh both within the Janata Dal and

outside, as Singh was in a position to address his newly carved out electoral base to accuse all his critics of being opposed to any attempt to try to uplift the Backward castes. The move helped as the anti-V.P. Singh passions were doused considerably within the Janata Dal, and the Congress too was in no position to launch an offensive against the government. However, the worst hit by the Government action, was the BJP and other RSS affiliates, as all hopes of forging an all-encompassing Hindu solidarity appeared to be fast diminishing, as Upper castes clashed with the Backward castes, and in places where violence did not erupt in the open, social tension precluded any possibility of joint action for a common cause. The ire of the BJP at the government decision can be gauged from a conversation between Advani and V.P. Singh, that was made common knowledge. A day before the decision to implement the Mandal Commission report was announced, Advani told Singh that both he and Somnath Chatterjee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) would like to discuss the issue with the Prime Minister. A meeting between them had been scheduled two days later, but Advani claimed that Singh refused to oblige by pleading that he had to announce the decision the next day. Advani claimed that Singh added: "You can well understand why I have to do it. He did not specifically refer to the rally, but the implications were clear".<sup>118</sup> However, the common refrain among significant sections of the Indian intelligentsia, and non-BJP political circles in the weeks following the decision of the government was simplistic at one level, but also indicative of the major problem area for the RSS clan: "V.P. Singh has finished the mandir with Mandal". The BJP also had to weather the problem created by J.K. Jain, one of its Rajya Sabha members, who went on fast against the government decision. Jain's action violated party discipline, but he had the support of senior RSS leaders.

Another veteran BJP leader, J.P. Mathur, a secretary of the party and a RSS *pracharak* since his youth, was also to recapitulate the assessment of the party in the weeks following the decision

of the government and the resulting assessment in the country. He said: "We suddenly realised what a dangerous man V.P. Singh was. While we were supporting his government, he was very neatly trying to cut the grass from below our feet".<sup>119</sup> If the decision of the Prime Minister to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission silenced the critics of Singh within the Janata Dal and forced the Congress and other forces opposed to the Prime Minister to rethink their strategies, it made the RSS clan desperate as all the good work of 1989 appeared to be coming to a naught as Hindus found 'hate symbols' within their own community, and not in other communities.

A series of informal meetings in August between various leaders of different RSS affiliates concluded that the fraternity had to come up with a unique programme to prevent the complete fragmentation of Hindu society. Informal discussions with several RSS and other BJP leaders in subsequent weeks revealed that almost all participants in the deliberations felt that the Ram temple issue still was the "best hope" for the RSS clan, to build bridges between different warring Hindu caste groups. However, none of the programmes announced by the VHP till that time had the capacity to create an euphoria, that would override the schisms created by the Mandal award. That was when the RSS clan emerged with a true trump card that was to be played by the BJP president. The card pitchforked Advani into international prominence, and ensured the end of the tenure of V.P. Singh in less than one year after he assumed office.

### **Seeking Mythological Support**

It was called the Rath Yatra and was a last ditch attempt by the RSS clan to regain the political initiative, lost to V.P. Singh by his decision. It envisaged Advani travelling in a modified Light Commercial Vehicle, with design alterations to give an impression of an ancient chariot. He was to travel from Somnath, the western fringe of India, to Ayodhya, and was to traverse nine

states besides the capital, and the entire sojourn was to last for 36 days, during which Advani would stop at regular intervals to address the gathered crowd, and ask them to go to Ayodhya to participate in the kar seva programme. He would also ask whether the government was right in criticising the Rath Yatra and whether the Hindus of this country were to be denied the right to build a temple for Ram. Within days of starting on his sojourn, Advani's image started acquiring the halo of a mythological character, as images were publicised of him astride the LCV with a bow in hand. He looked every bit a mythological warrior venturing to seize what was his rightfully, and was enlisting the support of the people in his attempt.

When the decision of the RSS clan to launch Advani on this strenuous journey was made public on September 12, and later in the third week of September, when the route of the Yatra was finalised at Bhopal during an orientation camp for the party's legislators and parliamentarians, there were few who anticipated the public response that Advani got along his route. However, by the time the BJP president traversed one-fourth of his 10,000-odd kilometer journey, the Rath Yatra started shaping up as "one of the biggest mass movements"<sup>120</sup> in post-Independence India. The reasons for this are not difficult to comprehend. Traditionally, Hindu society has a long tradition of yatras for pilgrimage and it gives a selfless halo to the person undertaking it, amidst great hardships. The chariot also symbolises an offensive move for a good cause and it had been used on several occasions in Indian politics most notably by N.T. Rama Rao when he launched his Chaitanya Ratham, after being displaced from power in Andhra Pradesh by Indira Gandhi. Later, it was also used by Devi Lal during his pre-election campaign who called his modified coach the Vijay Rath.

Advani's Rath Yatra thus appealed at two levels: As a pilgrimage undertaken by a person, and as an offensive against the government to give a rightful place to a revered god of the Hindu pantheon. In spite of orchestrated attempts by the government

and political adversaries of the RSS clan, as far as public perception was concerned, Advani's was a righteous mission and he had to be supported. Support for the Yatra came in two ways: By congregating at the places where the Advani bandwagon stopped and by listening to his speeches where he detailed the BJP's position on the Ayodhya dispute and elaborated on the concept of the Hindutva idea. On every occasion, Advani would say that the main aim of his venture was to ensure that Hindus, who constituted the majority in India, "lived with dignity and not oppressed by the assertions of all governments that they had to give special privileges to the minorities, because of their numerical status."<sup>121</sup> Advani was also helped by skillful media managements by his party organisers and by his co-traveller, party secretary Pramod Mahajan, who made it a point to enable all journalists trailing the Yatra to travel with Advani, for a certain distance. This ensured adequate news coverage, and by the time the Yatra entered Delhi to a rousing reception, Advani claimed that "everyone could see the impact of the Yatra except the Prime Minister".

One of the reasons why the Rath Yatra was a big success was the high level of organisational preparedness of the BJP and other affiliates of the RSS. We have seen earlier how the VHP had prepared for its silver jubilee year in 1989 and the infrastructure had not been dismantled. Coupled with the traditional RSS network, it had awesome potential to mobilise support. In 1990, it had been the BJP's turn to beef up its organisational apparatus, and this was done through a committee headed by party vice-president Sunder Singh Bhandari, a veteran RSS worker. The veteran leader was appointed to head a committee to take stock of the organisational network, and suggest methods to improve it during the executive session in Calcutta in April. The interim report of the committee was submitted at the executive meeting in Madras in July, and among other recommendations, it made the following significant suggestions:

a) Appoint full-time general secretaries in charge of organisational activities in all districts

b) Establish a Research Policy Formulation and Publicity Cell at the national level to disseminate party policies; and

c) Streamline Central and state party offices with help of modern technology including computerisation

These recommendations indicated the BJP leadership's realisation that it had to move with the changing times, and alter the method of organisational management. This was in sharp contrast to the ruling front, particularly the Janata Dal, which hardly had any organisation worth its name in any state. The party was still continuing like an organisation whose sole agenda were agitations in spite of the fact that it was governing the country. The extensive cadre base of the BJP, helped it at the local level by publicising each of the party's actions, while the adversaries of the BJP failed to publicise any of the government's decisions including those taken on the Ayodhya issue.

In the midst of the protests over the government decision to implement the Mandal Commission report, the VHP went ahead with its action programme as announced at Haridwar, and later modified at Vrindavan. However, none of the programmes evoked the kind of enthusiasm that the shila puja had generated. This had greatly to do with the caste tensions among various Hindu caste groups, following the Mandal Commission decision. The fire consecration ritual was held in Ayodhya on September 1 as planned earlier, but the ceremony did not witness any hysteria even in the temple town. The VHP had also started enlisting volunteers for the kar seva programme, through the Shri Ram Kar Seva Samitis that had been floated wherever the VHP or any other RSS affiliate had a presence. Even though the VHP leaders publicly declared that the response was good, in private conversations they confessed that the government decision had created problems for them as the people were "preoccupied". The lukewarm response of the people in joining the VHP agitation was one of the principal reasons for the RSS clan to launch Advani on the Rath Yatra.

The government meanwhile had also resumed the threads of

negotiations and the union minister of state for Home Affairs, Subodh Kant Sahay, individually met the leaders of the VHP and the Babri Action Committee in July. Little however was to surface in these meetings, as the two groups did not budge from their known postures: The Babri groups demanded the removal of the idols, and the restoration of the mosque to the Muslims; and the VHP insisted that its contention was not a judiciable matter, and the only solution would be if the Muslims agreed to relocate the present structure. Following the realisation that this approach would not lead the government towards any feasible solution, the government initiated a series of unofficial parleys with the religious leaders in an attempt to marginalise the VHP. The Prime Minister had two emissaries in Krishna Kant, the governor of Andhra Pradesh, and Mohammed Yunus Saleem, governor of Bihar who individually met with Jayendra Saraswati, Shankaracharya of Kanchi and Maulana Ali Mian Nadvi, a Lucknow based Islamic theologian. Other religious leaders were also enlisted and the government succeeded in getting them to issue appeals asking people to maintain peace. These implorings of the religious leaders were publicised on the government controlled media. Krishna Kant was trying to convince the Shankaracharya to head a Trust, that would build a new temple without demolishing the existing structure.

Ali Mian was subsequently taken by Kant to Kanchipuram, the seat of the Shankaracharya, where the two religious leaders met and agreed to the government viewpoint, that political elements should be kept out of the Ayodhya issue, and the matter should be resolved by religious leaders of the two communities. The Shankaracharya convened a press conference and issued a public statement in which he tom-tomed the government line. However, this alerted the VHP and others in the RSS clan, who in turn approached Vishvesha Teerth, the swami of Udipi, who had hosted the significant Dharam Sansad in 1985 when the Ayodhya agitation was revived, after being in cold storage following Indira Gandhi's assassination. The government also established contact



with the Udipi saint through a bureaucrat, and through Janata Dal leaders from Karnataka, R.K. Hegde and S.R. Bommai, and later by Krishna Kant. The suggestions made to him were similar to the one Kant had made to the Shankaracharya of Kanchi. A meeting was fixed at Delhi but before attending it, Teerth was briefed by Ashok Singhal. At the meeting, Teerth ruled out the formation of a new trust and demanded that the task of construction be handed over to the Trust formed by the VHP. He also said that a new temple could be built over the existing shrine by using pillars.

Subsequently, the government convened a meeting of religious leaders from the two communities, which however ended in a deadlock as both groups articulated the known views of the VHP and the Babri groups. This marked the end of the negotiations between the religious leaders, and left the government with no option but to explore a political solution to the dispute. The government had erred by projecting its aim to weaken the VHP, by weaning away the Hindu religious leaders from its fold while making no attempt to lessen the stranglehold of the Babri groups, on the Islamic theologians. The strategy of the government further enabled the VHP to publicise within its ranks its argument, that the dice was heavily loaded against the Hindus as the government was sympathetic towards the Muslims. In hindsight, it is evident that the National Front made the mistake of considering minority fundamentalism less dangerous, than Hindu fundamentalism.

By the second week of September, the process of social and political polarisation had started. The RSS clan was moving towards a heady confrontation at Ayodhya, the forces inimical to V.P. Singh in the Janata Dal, and a section in the industry were aiding the RSS affiliates. What brought diverse political and economic forces together was the blind hatred of Singh. The Congress too watched the scenario in a participative manner as it began sensing the fall of the government and its eventual return in a virtual rerun of 1979. The growing confrontation was also aided by the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister who decided that

after V.P. Singh, it was his turn to carve a permanent electoral constituency in the state. He embarked on an ambitious programme of staging public rallies in every district of the state, where he asserted that his government would not allow the kar seva programme and would even disallow Advani's Rath Yatra from entering the state. In his enthusiasm, aimed at enlisting the support of the Muslims, Yadav declared that he would "not even allow a bird to flutter"<sup>122</sup> in Ayodhya on October 30. The weeks preceding the launch of the Rath Yatra, and the subsequent developments smacked of high intensity political melodrama. Events moved at a lightning speed and even Advani was forced to liken Indian polity as a "cassette player whose 'play' button had been jammed and was on a perpetual 'fast forward'."<sup>123</sup>

V.P. Singh did not heed the warning bells sounded by his communist allies, and refused to halt the progress of the Yatra. By the time Advani reached Delhi on October 14 after traversing through the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana, a ground swell of support for the Hindutva idea was evident. While on his sojourn, Advani had briefly halted at Nagpur where he met with Balasaheb Deoras, and othersenior RSS leaders to take stock of the situation. At this meeting it was agreed that the RSS clan could not afford to allow V.P. Singh to continue as Prime Minister, and the BJP should withdraw support to the government at the first available opportunity. It was anticipated that this opportunity would come the moment the Rath Yatra was stopped, and Advani detained. The Prime Minister however, did not heed the signals and believed that the BJP was merely calling a bluff, and would backtrack at the last minute on the question of withdrawing support to his government.

Events moved at a swifter pace after the entry of the Rath Yatra in Delhi. The BJP while finalising the route to be taken by Advani, had cleverly split the yatra into two phases. From Delhi, Advani was to proceed to Bihar by train after spending a few days in the capital, while the LCV was driven to Dhanbad where

the BJP leader was to alight from the train. The break of five days was given ostensibly on account of the festival of Deewali but, it was apparent that the BJP leadership expected the government to resume talks, as the Rath Yatra entered its final phase. The BJP was also to decide on the crucial issue of withdrawing support from the government. Neither of these decisions could have been taken in the absence of Advani, as by the time the Rath had traversed less than half the decided route, Advani was towering over the party, and there were few challenges to him. The BJP was sure that the National Front government would cave in to public pressure like the Congress government had done in 1989, and allowed shilanyas. When the Rath Yatra reached Delhi, V.P. Singh's silence in spite of repeated demands from both within the Janata Dal, and outside it, was interpreted by several BJP leaders as an indication that the Prime Minister was considering options, regarding how to allow the kar seva programme.

However, even though the government explored the possibility of a negotiated settlement, the majority of these parleys were of an informal nature and thus no records were kept with the Home Ministry. This has led various political groups making different claims regarding the details of the meetings and their postures therein. While dwelling on the negotiations between the religious leaders during July, a Home ministry report stated that the "available record of the Home ministry contains very little material,"<sup>124</sup> on the second phase of talks that started after the arrival of the Rath Yatra the same report says that the negotiations "were of an informal nature, and proper and systematic record of these meetings are not available". The BJP has charged that the National Front government "conducted totally informal, and unrecorded negotiations in the most secretive manner".<sup>125</sup> However, it is clear that given the antipathy of the RSS clan towards the Prime Minister, after his decision to implement the Mandal Commission report, there was little chance of the government to conduct formal talks with the leaders of the RSS clan. The best hope for the government was to conduct behind

the scene parleys and if any success appeared imminent, bring the discussions into the open. This is borne out by the arguments of several key Janata Dal leaders who were engaged in the attempt to find a breakthrough on the Ayodhya issue, who stated that after the Mandal award it was evident that the BJP would try to scuttle all attempts to evolve a consensus on the dispute.

However, if V.P. Singh found little support from the RSS clan in trying to unravel the Ayodhya tangle, his efforts to project a new Muslim leadership, bore fruit as in the third week of October, when protracted negotiations were conducted by the government, the Muslim groups for once did not precipitate matters. At a meeting of Muslim leaders and theologians convened by the Shahi Imam of the capital's Jama Masjid on October 14, the tone was in sharp contrast to the earlier postures, when the meeting resolved that the "Muslims alone should not take the lead in preventing the Rath Yatra". The shift in strategy was in response to the explicit campaign of the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, who in his series of public meetings in the state, had repeatedly declared that he would not allow Advani's bandwagon to enter the state. He also stated that he would ensure the protection of the disputed shrine at all costs. Yadav had been able to enlist the support of other political parties, and a grand public meeting was held in the state capital on October 12. The political parties endorsed Yadav's decision, and the meeting of the Muslims leaders while reviewing the political scenario, declaring that it had "appreciated with satisfaction the declaration which condemned the Rath Yatra, and resolved to prevent its entry into the state." The meeting was a notable development, as the majority of Muslim groups agitating for the restoration of the Babri Masjid to the community decided to take the back seat and allow the UP government and other non-BJP, non-Congress parties from carrying out a campaign against the RSS clan, and the Rath Yatra. Jawed Habib one of the Muslim leaders who participated in the meeting, said that he saw little reason for the Muslims to take matters to a head "on their own, when there are other political parties willing to do the same". The

argument of Habib and others in the meeting was that the Muslim leadership should play second fiddle to Yadav and his associates, as direct involvement of the Muslim leadership, would give a fillip to the RSS and its affiliates, as it would be able to shift the nature of the controversy from a "political one to a religious dispute. A Hindu versus Muslim situation had always helped the VHP, and we did not want to repeat the past mistakes," Habib had contended.

V.P. Singh resumed negotiations after the entry of the Rath Yatra in the capital, and one of his first actions was to invite the well-known chartered accountant, S. Gurumurthy, an RSS *swayamsevak* for long, and also an influential person in his own right by way of his connections with the Indian Express chain of newspapers. The BJP claimed that the two Singh and Gurumurthy "sat in four sessions for over four hours in the evening to well past midnight". The Prime Minister sought the chartered accountant's suggestions on the controversy, and it was suggested to him that the government "should acquire the entire disputed area, and hand it over to the VHP Trust, but retain the disputed structure with a 30 feet area around it under its title and possession, and refer the issue whether there was a pre-existing Hindu structure for judicial opinion to the Supreme Court". Gurumurthy said that such a reference to the Supreme Court should be made under Article 143 of the Constitution, and the BJP claimed that the Prime Minister "readily accepted the suggestion". Gurumurthy was to communicate this to the RSS-VHP leadership and as a reciprocal gesture, the "movement of kar sevaks should stop or be slowed down". This was communicated to the RSS-VHP leadership by Gurumurthy and later "relayed back their acceptance" to the Prime Minister.<sup>126</sup>

However, the RSS clan decided to keep the pressure on the government, and the BJP convened an emergency session of its executive in the capital on October 17. The meeting underlined the fact that by that time the BJP and others in the RSS clan had virtually decided to ground the National Front government,

and all efforts to evolve a negotiated settlement, was primarily a facade for the BJP. The executive of the BJP resolved that the government must "honour the sentiments of the people and allow a temple to be built". It was clear that for the BJP there was no other way to resolve the crisis, but to allow the temple to be built in the manner decided by the VHP. It was the responsibility of the government to find out means by which the temple construction programme could get started, and if it failed in locating a way out, the BJP would withdraw support to the government, thus reducing it to a minority status in Parliament. The BJP made it clear that if the government "disrupts the Rath Yatra, the BJP would be constrained to withdraw support to the government". The party leadership also announced that it had been decided that Atal Behari Vajpayee, the leader of the parliamentary wing of the party, would march to the President and hand over the letter withdrawing support the moment Advani's bandwagon was halted, and the BJP leader placed under detention. The executive also spelt out the party's reservations on the Mandal award. The two main charges against the government was that the decision had been taken without "any consultation of the supporting parties," and that the decision had been made public "without qualifying it with an economic criteria". It was apparent that while the BJP was in no position to oppose caste-based reservations *per se*, it was trying to dilute the opposition to it by promising reservations for the economically backward among the Upper castes. The party leadership also rightly claimed that this approach had been followed by the party with consistency, since its inception.

### **Arresting Governance**

Even though the die had been cast a day earlier, the government continued its efforts to hammer out a negotiated settlement. On October 18, George Fernandes and P. Upendra, Ministers in the Union cabinet, met with the VHP strongman Ashok Singhal at

the RSS office in the capital, and informed him that the government was proposing to promulgate an ordinance that would acquire the disputed property, and hand over the land to the VHP Trust while retaining the disputed shrine. V.P. Singh also had a meeting with the BJP general secretary, Govindacharya, and Arun Jaitley, the BJP leader who had been appointed Additional Solicitor General by the government. The discussions in this meeting related to the issue of an Ordinance, and the eventual reference to the Supreme Court under Article 143 of the Constitution. Subsequent to this a draft ordinance was prepared by officials, which however was not released as it had to be whetted from various angles. The Prime Minister also summoned Gurumurthy, who had in the meanwhile left for Madras.

By late evening on October 18 however, opposition was growing to the government's move to acquire the property, and hand over the land to the VHP, as it was seen by critics as an attempt similar to the Congress government's decision to allow shilanyas, the previous year. V.P. Singh met Gurumurthy on October 19 and in the meeting Singh stated that the government would not hand over the disputed land to the VHP Trust, but that they would start construction outside the disputed area. Gurumurthy said that this would not be acceptable to the BJP, and other RSS affiliates. Another meeting was scheduled and Singh requested Advani, to defer resuming his Rath Yatra by a day, which he refused arguing that there was little need for him to be present, if the Ordinance was promulgated on the lines agreed upon. Even as Advani left for Dhanbad by train, ministers and officials huddled together and drafted out the Ordinance that was eventually released late that night.

However, the government move came in for sharp criticism. The Muslim groups charged that the government was trying to "allow the temple through the back door". The Muslim leadership also found a supporter in Mulayam Singh Yadav, who felt that the promulgation of the Ordinance went against his campaign in the last several weeks, and that if he allowed the

Centre's move, he would suffer a loss of face in his growing constituency. Yadav virtually threatened the Centre that he would not implement the Ordinance, and the subsequent handing over of land to the VHP. However, the BJP and others in the RSS clan "cautiously welcomed the move," as the decision was in tune with the agreement between Singh and them. Even at that stage, Singh had not yet taken the decision to politically combat the BJP. His approach was to untangle the Ayodhya dispute for the moment, by allowing the kar seva programme, and in the process earn a fresh lease of life for his government. However, criticism to the ordinance move within his own party, left Singh with no option but to backtrack and withdraw the Ordinance on October 21, and direct Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Yadav to arrest Advani early on October 23 at Sitamarhi. With these two decisions, the stage had been set for the biggest confrontation so far in Ayodhya, between the activists of the RSS clan and the Indian State.

Even though the government decided to arrest Advani, the political viewpoint that the BJP and other affiliates of the RSS were propagating, was finding acceptance among large sections on Indian society. This is most evident in an internal intelligence report filed by an inspector of police on October 21, as it underlines the sneaking support of the security forces for the BJP. The report charged the Janata Dal and Communist Party of India leaders with "visiting Muslim localities (in Biharsharif, a communally sensitive town) and instigating them to prevent the Rath Yatra. The CPI workers along with Janata Dal leaders are likely to create communal tension in Biharsharif on the occasion of L.K. Advani's visit". At one level, this report gives credence to the argument of the BJP that the Rath Yatra did not lead to communal flare-ups, except on occasions when other political groups tried preventing it. However, the point to be noted is that the author of the intelligence report has word only for the adversaries of the BJP and not a word regarding how the supporters of the BJP were preparing for the Rath Yatra, or how efforts were



being made to ensure that the Muslims did not venture on the streets, when the cavalcade was passing through the area.

The decision to arrest Advani however, was not taken by the local police, but by the state government. It was a political decision taken after due consultations with the Prime Minister. The *raison d'être* cited for detaining Advani, was to "prevent him from acting in a manner prejudicial to the maintenance of public order". The BJP leader was arrested under sub-section (2) of Section 3 of the National Security Act, 1980, and shifted to a government guest house controlled by the Irrigation Department of the state government, in Dumka district of South Bihar. With the arrest of Advani, the fate of the National Front government had been sealed, but of greater importance than the eventual fall of the government, was the planned kar seva programme at Ayodhya as it was now apparent that it would be a no holds barred battle with Mulayam Singh Yadav, holding up the cudgels on behalf of the detractors of the RSS and its affiliates.

Within hours of the news of Advani's arrest reaching Delhi, Vajpayee had handed over the letter stating the BJP's intent to withdraw support to the government, to President R. Venkataraman. The fact that Vajpayee led the BJP delegation to the President, was symbolic as the veteran leader had expressed grave reservations on the Rath Yatra. This indicated that the RSS clan had closed ranks to see the end of the National Front government, and successfully storm Ayodhya. The BJP decided to launch a virtual assault on the temple-town. All senior leaders were to lead bands of kar sevaks. One of the biggest such brigades was to come from Madhya Pradesh adjoining Uttar Pradesh, as the BJP was in power in the state, and the entire state machinery was swung into action to facilitate the movement of kar sevaks. Both the RSS clan and the UP government prepared themselves for the fateful day, even as V.P. Singh refused to tender his resignation, and instead declared that he would face Parliament and try proving his majority on the floor of the House.

Mulayam Singh Yadav, meanwhile, sealed the borders of the

state and canceled several trains and long distance buses. All over the state, public buses were stopped, and if anyone was suspected to be bound for Ayodhya, he or she was detained. The senior BJP leader, Vijaya Raje Scindia was detained just after she entered Uttar Pradesh from Madhya Pradesh. She was leading a band of women, members of a militant women's wing of the BJP, euphemistically called Durga Vahini, along with the emerging firebrand woman MP from Khajuraho, Uma Bharti. Soon, it became a matter of prestige between the state government, and those who wanted to reach the temple-town. However, the absence of public transport did not deter the people from walking for several kilometres, through villages and fields to reach Ayodhya. The districts adjoining Faizabad were replete with families willing to extend a helping hand to the band of marchers. Everything from water to food, to a place of rest was made available to the people, who themselves felt that they had embarked on a historic mission. With the deadline to start construction fast approaching, it was clear that there was little trace of the schism in Hindu society, that had surfaced after the government decision to implement the Mandal Commission report. The Rath Yatra and other programmes of the VHP had been able to build the bridges between various caste groups once again. The 'hate symbol' was no longer among the co-religionists, but among the Muslims and in the disputed shrine at Ayodhya. Frenzied youngsters headed towards Ayodhya, and at places their enthusiasm turned into anger against Muslims whose houses they attacked. The state government did its best to prevent a large assembly, but there was little it could do except man the state highways, and when the kar sevaks marched through fields, it was a losing battle for the security forces. Breaking through the security cordon was also VHP leader Ashok Singhal who surfaced in the temple-town on October 28 in spite of attempts of the intelligence agencies to locate his whereabouts and arrest him. After appearing in Ayodhya, Singhal declared that the programme would go on as planned earlier, and promptly went

underground in the temple-town. He monitored the developing situation, but there was little that the police could do to trace him. Almost all the leaders of the BJP and the VHP who headed towards Ayodhya, were arrested and they included Mahant Aavidyanath, and Swami Chinmayanand another religious leader associated with the temple agitation he later joined the BJP and became a member of Parliament. It was a veritable war situation, with the RSS clan declaring that it was determined to start kar seva and Yadav stating that he would not allow the disputed shrine to be damaged.

What finally happened on October 30, and in the subsequent days has been documented by the media extensively. In the final analysis, both Yadav and the VHP claimed that they had won the day. Yadav's contention was that in spite of orchestrated attempts of the VHP and its allies, the state government had successfully protected the Babri Masjid, and that the damage to it in the attack by hundreds of kar sevaks on October 30, had been marginal that could be repaired within a matter of a few hours. The VHP on its part cited the use of "brute force" and argued that in spite of such opposition, the kar sevaks had successfully broken through the security cordon and hoisted saffron flags atop the Babri Masjid. The firing on the determined band of kar sevaks on November 2 when they attempted to march towards the Babri Masjid for the second time led to Yadav being nicknamed 'Mullah Mulayam' by the VHP activists. More than two dozen kar sevaks died in the firings on October 30 and November 2, however, Yadav still had no qualms about using force. He asserted that government had to "decide at times what is more important: Human lives or the law of the land. I chose to uphold the Constitution of India".<sup>127</sup> For his hard-line approach in 1990, Yadav has been able to carve out a permanent niche for himself in the average Muslim mind, and a corresponding hatred from the supporters of the RSS clan.

With political developments heating up in the capital, the VHP decided to suspend any further action in Ayodhya, as it

was clear that Yadav was determined to thwart any attempt by the VHP activists to enter the Babri Masjid. There was also the added factor that the RSS clan had been able to extract the maximum advantage from the kar seva programme: The Ram temple agitation had acquired the character of one of the "biggest mass movements in post-Independence India," and it was time for the advocates of the Hindutva idea to consolidate politically following the ideological and social consolidation. There was also a sense of achievement among the kar sevaks who had gathered in Ayodhya and there was no problem of the activists being disheartened at not being able to start construction. The leaders of the RSS affiliates assembled in Ayodhya argued in speeches that after the ouster of V.P. Singh's government, the next twin moves should be to show the door to Yadav and vote in a new government that was sympathetic to the temple cause meaning the BJP. The decision to suspend the kar seva programme and ask the kar sevaks to return home was a tactical retreat from the temple-town to prepare for the next round, thereby enabling the BJP to get a greater stranglehold on Indian politics.

However, there had been visible schisms also in the VHP during the week-long programme at Ayodhya. A number of religious leaders most notably Swami Vamdev felt that the decision to try marching again to the Babri Masjid on November 2 was wrong as it "unnecessarily exposed the unarmed kar sevaks to bullets". The decision was taken at the behest of Ashok Singhal who contended that a few lives lost would only help the agitation. He wanted the assembled activists to make another attempt to storm the Babri masjid, but was opposed at a meeting of the senior VHP leaders camping at Ayodhya. At that stage, the religious leaders who were lending support to the VHP agitation were yet to come to terms with the fact that the RSS clan viewed the Ram temple programme essentially as a means to further the growth of the BJP. Swami Vamdev, even though consulted on the issue of the nominating the next BJP president Advani's two terms as president was coming to an end, and since

the party constitution disallowed any office-bearer from continuing for more than two two-year terms was still unclear about his active participation in politics. He also articulated the scepticism of the majority of religious leaders regarding the sincerity of the BJP in building the temple if it was voted into office. This contradiction among the protagonists of the Ram temple among the traditionalists from the RSS fold and the neo-converts, which included the religious leaders, was a difficult problem for the RSS leadership to surmount especially as the religious leaders had for long owed allegiance to the Congress. What made the problem more acute for the RSS clan were divisions within their own ranks on the manner in which the BJP had led the temple agitation from the front since the government decision to implement the Mandal Commission report in July. Scepticism had been openly aired by Atal Behari Vajpayee and his views were shared by a large number of party leaders who felt that the BJP was getting stuck with the image of an party that had little concerns beyond the Ayodhya agitation.

While the greater part of the Ayodhya drama was enacted in public, there were significant contributions from behind the scenes. One such person who played a key role was S.C. Dixit, a retired Director-General of Police of the state, who had joined the VHP after his retirement. With the security forces throwing a security ring around Ayodhya, Dixit was instrumental in drawing up routes to be taken by the kar sevaks, and this was done with the help of loyal former colleagues, who revealed the security plans of the police. Dixit was among the first batch of kar sevaks that entered the Babri Masjid on October 30 to start hammering at the iron grill inside the compound, and hoist the saffron flags atop the domes after damaging them marginally. His presence was one of the reasons why the police did not open fire on the kar sevaks till the time they entered the Babri Masjid, and started damaging the shrine. Dixit was also instrumental in the VHP decision to mobilise the largest contingent of kar sevaks on the eastern side of the temple-town across the river Saryu and

when the activists marched towards Ayodhya, the police was ill prepared, and even after opening fire could not prevent the hordes from crossing the bridge and thus entering the town. There had been intelligence failure and in hindsight Mulayam Singh Yadav conceded that "security plans were leaked to Dixit".

## Heroines Upfront

If Ayodhya had its share of heroes in the form of Dixit and other kar sevaks who were killed in the police firing, it also had its heroine. She was Uma Bharti, a first time member of Parliament from Khajuraho, a small town in central India, whose claim to fame before electing her in the 1989 elections, were the erotic sculptures in the temples. In her early thirties, she was a sanyasin, wore saffron robes, specialised in provocative speeches when she talked of the great injustice being done to the "Hindus in their own land". Drawn into the RSS fold since her childhood, her first initiation into the world view of the RSS, had come during her *pravachans* (religious sermons) as a child and as she grew in age, her fame travelled to newer parts and she was invited to more places. Spotted by Vijaya Raje Scindia during one such occasion, Uma Bharti was enrolled in the BJP, and given a party nomination in 1989 and won the seat for the party. Soon her charisma spread outside the constituency as the media profiled her on numerous occasions and she soon came to be referred as the 'sexy sanyasin.' What got her the epithet was neither her extraordinary looks or her lifestyle, but the fact that she with her saffron robes evoked the image of the 'unattainable woman' and thereby generated a strong sexual image.

As the media hype around her continued, Uma Bharti attained national prominence which was further bolstered by her ardent championing of the Ayodhya agitation. During the build-up to the kar seva programme, she addressed public gatherings in several states and drew great applause for her shrill oratory. However, the majority of her fans were not women, but men

especially the unemployed youth as was the case of the VHP. When Uma Bharti was heading for Ayodhya, she was arrested by the Uttar Pradesh police the moment she entered the state. Detained at a government guest house, she nonetheless staged a spectacular escape and surfaced in Ayodhya a day later sans hair. She disclosed to the assembled journalists that after her escape from the place of detention, she shaved off her head in an attempt to disguise herself and hitched lifts, including rides in police vehicles, to reach the temple-town. She claimed that the police stopped her on several occasions but none of them had been able to recognise her because of her new look. Uma Bharti was asked by journalists whether she had felt any remorse while shaving her head. She replied in the negative and declared, that she was willing to sacrifice anything for the cause of the Ram temple. Another BJP member of Parliament from Gandhi Nagar in Gujarat, Harin Pathak, who had also sneaked past the police cordon into Ayodhya, was awe-struck on seeing Uma Bharti. His comment: "Umaji has sacrificed the near ultimate of femininity for the cause of the temple".

Pathak, in fact, underlined the inherent sexuality in the Ayodhya movement that surfaced during the kar seva programme in October, 1990. Given the fact that a large percentage of the neo-converts to the RSS fold who thronged Ayodhya were part of the large army of unemployed, directionless small town youth, whose search for an identity, often acquired sexual overtones as they came from sexually repressive backgrounds. As sex is traditionally viewed as a method of taking revenge and subjugating another community, there were open assertions by these youths that they wanted to humiliate Muslims in India, and sex would be the instrument. This was evident in a large number of hastily painted graffiti in Ayodhya. They were unsigned slogans and each was in first person: "I am the son-in-law of Babur; I sleep with a Muslim's daughter; Zeenat Aman and Saira Banu are all available to me." These slogans were written all over the temple town and also scribbled on the dusty window panes of all traveling cars that the kar

sevaks would stop to check the occupants and elicit loud *Jai Shri Ram* slogans from the travelers.

By October 1990, the activists of the RSS clan who gathered in Ayodhya, were no longer concerned merely with building a Ram temple after demolishing the Babri Masjid, rather, the sight had been set on total subjugation of the Muslims, and this was best articulated in terms of sexual humiliation of the community. The names of the leading Muslim film stars sex symbols of their time were cited in the graffiti as an indication of the real motive of the kar sevaks: 'We wish to sexually possess leading women from your community, as a symbolic act of the total subjugation of your lot.' In contrast, Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara, another *sanyasin* who had started making her presence felt by hysteric anti-Muslim speeches, that were freely available on audio cassettes and played on blaring microphones all over the country in the build-up to the kar seva programme, were also sexual symbols of a different kind. A miniscule section of the followers of these two women were feminine and the men who were drawn to them, came primarily out of the desire to see Hindu women who had the courage to question "centuries of subjugation of the Hindus, by the Islamic invaders and their ancestors".

In several speeches, Rithambara would goad her audience comprising mainly unemployed youth and well-placed businessmen to "stir out of their impotency and give it back to them". Rithambara's body language there would often be movements that had strong parallels to the sexual gyrations seen in popular India cinema always complimented her words. The two women got religious sanctity from the saffron robes, and their exhortations could not be faulted. They symbolised the '*devi*' cult that was trying to restore the lost virility of the Hindu youth. These speeches of Rithambara and Uma Bharti were one of the prime reason for the display of sexual aggression towards Muslims women, and it was in tune with the historical pattern of using sex as a tool for socio-political enslavement of the community, at the



receiving end. Complete hegemony is established over a community after sexual dominance.

Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara were in fact the first real women mass leaders in the entire RSS clan. In spite of the fact that the BJP has had few women as parliamentarians, except for a rare Vijaya Raje Scindia, her daughter Vasundhara Raje, or Sushma Swaraj from Haryana, few have either had mass appeal or been projected by the party leadership. Women have at best been treated as the euphemistic 'add-ons' in the party structure. Part of this stems from the fact that the RSS is an exclusive male organisation and even though a Rashtriya Swayamsewika Sangh was established way back in 1936, its growth has been negligible and has had little place in the scheme of things of the RSS leadership. This is evident in an interview by RSS joint secretary K. Sudarshan, who even while giving an "otherwise comprehensive account of RSS affiliates"<sup>128</sup> forgot to mention the women's wing of the RSS. Unlike the Congress, the RSS never had key women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Tarakeshwari Sinha and others. This had been one of the principal factors for the failure of the BJP to have a substantial following among the women electorate, known for their frequent independent decisions during elections. Vijaya Raje Scindia has been a significant woman leader of the BJP throughout the 1980s, but she has had a Congress past and the image of a godmother stemming from her royalty. However, in the case of Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara, the proverbial unique selling point has been religion. However, the women who have cast their lot with the BJP in the 1989 and 1991 elections have done so not because of the appeal of the two women leaders, but because of the stranglehold of the Ram cult on their consciousness. In the subsequent years, unless the RSS changes its strategy on enlisting the support of women, the present following among women has the likelihood of evaporating. However, the skillful use of Uma Bharti and Sadhvi Rithambara has greatly benefited the BJP and other affiliates of the RSS. In the 1991 elections, Rithambara was

often used in election meetings to draw crowds and have them waiting before the arrival of senior leaders. The ploy succeeded as the popularity of the sanyasin had spread in the entire Hindi speaking areas, thanks to the audio cassettes available even in the small towns and relatively bigger hamlets.

The kar seva programme of October 1990 also led to the growth of a veritable industry that manufactured audio and video cassettes, printed posters and booklets, produced stickers to be pasted, and even an assortment of clothes, ornaments and other accessories for women. The audio cassettes were manufactured by opportunistic businessmen who seized the chance and recorded the speeches of Uma Bharti, Rithambara, and cobbled together small bands, to sing various *bhajans* and appeals to people to assemble at Ayodhya, and participate in the kar seva programme. All these songs were set to the tune of popular Hindi films songs and they sought to evoke the image of the hero participating in an act of bravado, for the sake of the Ram temple, instead of the heroine as in the film. The songs were set to the tune of popular songs from Hindi films because of the tremendous control of popular cinema, on the average Indian mind. Both the target audience as also leaders like Uma Bharti and Rithambara had roots in the same cultural tradition and it was only natural that the tunes would evoke different images while the words would goad the listener to other goals. The video cassettes were produced by the BJP leader, J.K. Jain who had gone on fast against the decision to implement the Mandal Commission report. He runs a studio from the premises of Vijaya Raje Scindia. The cassettes first dwelt on the myth of Ayodhya being the birthplace of Ram, and after the kar seva programme, skillfully presented the firing of November 2 as an incident similar to the Jalianwala Bagh massacre in magnitude. The cassettes contributed greatly in propagating the VHP claim that "thousands had been killed by *Mullah Mulayam* when they tried to build a Ram temple".

## Success With Symbols

By the time the kar sevaks congregated at Ayodhya in October 1990, the traditional north Indian greeting 'Jai Siya Ram' a phonetic deviation of 'Jai Sita Ram' had been sanskritised to 'Jai Shri Ram' and been given the connotation of a battle cry. It became the marching words of a community on the move, and was mouthed by the kar sevaks while they made their way to the temple town through the fields adjoining the town and later while launching the assault on the Babri Masjid on October 30 and while ravaging a few Muslim houses on the outskirts of Ayodhya. The slogan had also been similarly used during Advani's Rath Yatra, and coupled with images of the BJP leader atop the modern chariot replete with bow and arrow, generated powerful images of a community that was no longer willing to take things lying down. The slogan was matched by the use of saffron bandannas with the slogan printed over it, and it virtually became the new uniform for the RSS clan. Similarly, lockets, and bracelets found their way to the market and traders did good business peddling these wares. For women, special *bindis* were manufactured with the sketch of the proposed temple printed on it. The success of these new symbols can be gauged from the fact that in the 1991 elections, the BJP also produced and distributed similar material. Among women, there was a special demand for the *bindis* with the 'lotus' the election symbol of the BJP printed on it. The use of new icons has since been perfected by the RSS clan and they were again used to great benefit during the demolition of the Babri Masjid when the loud speakers exhorted the assembled kar sevaks to "erase the symbol of shame". Other symbols and images have similarly become synonymous with the world view projected by the RSS and its affiliates.

In the first week of November 1990, the kar sevaks who had come from various parts of the country, were jubilant. Mulayam Singh Yadav's claim that he would not allow any assembly in the temple-town, had been proved hollow and there had been

an upsurge of anger among Hindus at the firing on November 2. Residents of Faizabad who had stayed aloof from the VHP led agitation so far took to the streets one night, and the Muslims of the district faced the wrath for the first time after the agitation was launched by the VHP. But with the imminent collapse of the V.P. Singh led government, the assembled kar sevaks also knew that it was time to make a tactical retreat from Ayodhya, and prepare for the eventual political battle. The kar sevaks wrote letters to their near ones which have been preserved by the families. One such written on November 4 stated that "there is great jubilation in our camp. Even though several kar sevaks have been killed, their deaths have been to our advantage. I have successfully completed what I came to do and thanks to Lord Rama, I am in a position to write this letter to you (it was addressed to the boy's mother). However, now the job is over and I have to return home to ensure that the party that cares for the Hindus gets a chance to govern Mother India".<sup>129</sup> Given the understanding among the kar sevaks, there was no feeling of disappointment at leaving the job of building a new temple unfinished, when the VHP leadership directed kar sevaks to return home.

The action shifted to Delhi and the stage was Parliament where V.P. Singh was to try to prove his majority on November 7. A one-line vote of confidence was moved by Singh, and a fiery debate followed during which charges were traded. The Congress voted against the motion, as also the BJP and the two parties along with the dissenters in the Janata Dal who split the party, ensured the ouster of the government. While participating in the debate on the motion of confidence, Advani explained the reasons leading to his party's decision to withdraw support from the government. Advani asserted that the government decision to stop the Rath Yatra, arrest him and prevent the start of construction at Ayodhya, was not the only reason leading to his party's decision, but it "certainly was the last straw". The main reason for the BJP to withdraw support to the government was

the decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report and the subsequent furore over it. He said that association with the government had become "more and more burdensome" for the BJP since June.

However, the BJP had found it politically imprudent to withdraw support on the issue of the Mandal Commission and had to peg the decision on another issue. Advani himself corroborated the party's considerations when he declared that the "decision to withdraw support had to be related to something specific and important". The BJP, when it informed the President that the party was withdrawing support from the government cited the detention of Advani. However, in August, the party could not have gone to R. Venkataraman to inform him that it was withdrawing support because V.P. Singh wanted to reserve jobs on the basis of caste. It would have led to the permanent alienation of the BJP with the backward castes and made V.P. Singh a demi-god of sorts among these castes. Instead, the BJP adopted the strategy of first eliminating the schisms that had surfaced in Hindu society through programmes like the Rath Yatra and kar seva and later withdrew its support to the V.P. Singh government.

An interesting feature of the build-up to the kar seva programme was the marginal effect the RSS clan's campaign had in the state of Bihar. With a history of Backward caste assertion from the time the Janata Party formed the government in the state with Karpooori Thakur as Chief Minister, Bihar had seen the political ambitions of the Backward castes on the rise. Bihar also had a long history of caste tensions more than in any other Indian state. When the National Front government announced the Mandal award, it was greeted with great joy in the entire state, and this was utilised by Laloo Prasad Yadav, the Janata Dal Chief Minister to further polarise the state on the basis of caste, with the Backward castes forming an alliance with the Muslims. The Rath Yatra and all other programmes of the VHP failed to evoke much response and the Chief Minister also shrewdly chose not

to highlight his criticism of the Ayodhya campaign during his public rallies, but instead, opted to highlight the government decision to implement the report, and the impact this had had on the political forces opposed to the political and social rise of the backward castes.

The Ram temple agitation was projected as a Brahminical agitation, that would reinforce the second class status of the backward castes. Laloo Yadav argued that both the lower castes and the Muslims had one common social enemy the Upper castes Hindus and contended that they were represented by the BJP. This argument had an impact in the state, and underscored in the state during the 1991 elections, when the BJP failed to make much headway, and the Janata Dal continued to be the predominant political force in the state. However, a similar situation was not witnessed in Uttar Pradesh, the home state of V.P. Singh and in the 1991 elections, the results demonstrated the tremendous growth of the BJP that led to the formation of the first BJP-controlled government in the state. While it is true that Uttar Pradesh did not have a deep tradition of caste conflict like in Bihar, Mulayam Singh Yadav had also erred in his strategy of taking a harsh posture on the temple issue and diluting the government decision to implement the Mandal Commission report. The virulence with which he conducted his harmony rallies in the state greatly aided the RSS clan as he (Yadav) projected himself as a "symbol who had to be defied if anyone wanted to prove his masculinity".<sup>130</sup>

There was also the issue of fractures within the Janata Dal and with the disintegration of the party imminent, the moot point was the race to carve out permanent social constituencies. Since the decision to implement the Mandal Commission report was essentially V.P. Singh's, Yadav had little to politically gain by publicising the decision. Yadav himself was a member of the backward castes and he was confident that the community at least the sizable Yadavs would stand by him during any electoral test. His next target was clearly the Muslims as his calculation

was that a combination of Yadav and Muslim votes would enable him to have a pivotal position in the state. Thus while Laloo Yadav projected himself as a person devoted to ostracising caste-based repression from Hindu society and argued that secular politics was essentially a part of his broad approach the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister focused solely on the issue of communalism. This approach greatly benefited the RSS clan and they conceded that Mulayam Singh Yadav had been "one of their main allies" for the kar seva programme.

If 1989 had ended on a high note for V.P. Singh and his new party, 1990 had clearly belonged to the BJP and Advani had emerged as a colossus in the Indian political theatre. His supporters had clandestinely tried to elect him as the BBC's Man of the Year, but when the 'fraud' was discovered, the Corporation hastily altered its decision. But there was no denying that if there had been one man who had orchestrated Indian polity in 1990, it was Advani. It had been a silent rise for the 1927 born man from Sindh who did his early education in Karachi before Partition hounded him and his family out from his home town. His initiation in the RSS had started while in college and when the Jana Sangh was formed, he functioned as the secretary of the Rajasthan unit till 1957 when he shifted to the capital and was trained in the parliamentary methods by Atal Behari Vajpayee. Even though Advani went on to grow politically, and was even the president of the Jana Sangh in the 1970s, he never had the charisma of Vajpayee and was not projected by the party as a mass leader. Advani was not considered very promising by the political adversaries of the BJP after his elevation as party president.

However, his shrewd marshaling of resources and talent during his tenure saw the BJP developing a vice-like grip on Indian polity. By the time Advani bowed out of office in February 1991, he had overshadowed everyone in his party, including Vajpayee. This was evident in the nomination of a trusted ally of Advani's, K. Govindacharya, as party general secretary.

Govindacharya had been a RSS whole-timer since the 1960s and had been deputed to the ABVP when Advani spotted him in 1988 and "brought him over" as his political secretary. Govindacharya, an organisational expert, was responsible for several of the modern methods of organisational management as also astute media management by simply being accessible to journalists. His rise in the BJP hierarchy was practically meteoric and his eclipsing several veteran leaders was not appreciated by several of his colleagues. What also went against Govindacharya was his forceful style of functioning as opposed to the low key methods of others in the party. The personality clashes between Govindacharya and other party leaders came to a head in the spring of 1992 when attempts were made to link his name with Uma Bharti.

While this was the first scandal with sexual overtones to have hit the BJP at the national level, it was indicative of the party going through the transitional phase of emerging from a pure cadre-based organisation to one with a mass character. As the organisation grew, the spoils also became visible and factionalism reared its head as groups wanted to exclude the others from sharing the benefits of power stemming from a organisation in a pivotal position. The faction struggle within the BJP also underlined that the RSS, through training the cadre in a certain political ideology, had not been able to change basic human traits. However, the RSS stepped in to resolve the dispute and a temporary truce was worked out that led to Govindacharya being dispatched to Madras and asked to limit his interactions with the media. Uma Bharti on her own part, first threatened to quit politics and after recovering from the trauma of a reported abortion, took *diksha* from her guru to become a true ascetic. She however, neither resigned from the BJP nor from Parliament.

Even as the BJP prepared for the organisational changes and drew up strategies to politically consolidate on the gains of the kar seva programme, there were far reaching political changes



in the capital. V.P. Singh submitted his resignation to the President following the defeat of the vote of confidence. Subsequent to this Rajiv Gandhi was invited as the leader of the Opposition to form the government, an offer which the Congress president declined arguing that his party did not have a majority. Chandrasekhar, the leader of the breakaway faction of the Janata Dal was then called to form the government which he accepted and the events of 1979 were repeated when the Congress offered to support the government from outside. However, the situation was more ludicrous than 1979 for Chandrasekhar headed a group of barely 60-odd MPs. In the debate in Parliament on November 16 during the vote of confidence moved by the new government Advani questioned the political legitimacy of the new government and even while not using the same words, echoed the sentiments he had used barely a week ago when V.P. Singh had moved the vote of confidence. The BJP president had expressed happiness at the fact that during the debate on the motion moved by V.P. Singh, the "focus has been on what is secularism, what is communalism and what is nationalism". Advani further pleaded that the debate should not be confined to Parliament and that political parties should "seek the people's opinion on these issues and let there be an election on the basis of this debate". By the end of 1990, the BJP had succeeded beyond any doubt in having broadened the canvas of the Ayodhya dispute from that of building a Ram temple in place of the Babri Masjid, to that of replacing the existing socio-political system with another one.

### **Spotlight on the Negotiating Table**

However, it went to the merit of the new government that it did not lose initiative on the Ayodhya dispute and even as the VHP announced its plans of staging a month-long satyagraha at Ayodhya, the government succeeded in bringing together the leaders of the VHP and the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee to

sit across the table and discuss a way out of the dispute. The two warring groups were brought together by Chandrasekhar with the help of his allies both in the government and in other parties. A crucial role was played by the Chief Ministers of Maharashtra and Rajasthan Sharad Pawar of the Congress and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat of the BJP, both personal friends of the Prime Minister for long. The two used their political and personal connections in the RSS clan to bring the VHP to the negotiating table. The task of bringing the Muslim leaders to the meeting was detailed to Mulayam Singh Yadav, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh who had parted ways with V.P. Singh and depended on Congress support for the survival of his ministry. Little however emerged at this meeting and a government backgrounder claims that "though inconclusive, the meeting decided to continue the dialogue".

The government at this meeting was represented by the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Subodh Kant Sahay, who had also played a crucial role in V.P. Singh's ministry and had defected to the rebel group. The government position was made clear: It was not playing a partisan role but its status was of a neutral arbitrator that was bringing the warring groups to discuss the issue and find a way out. The government ploy was simple: The warring groups should consider the other group as the 'haro symbol' and not the government. The political situation in India also gave the new government little option as it could not have afforded another round of confrontation with either of the two groups and the reasoning was that the government would get a "breathing space if the groups quibbled with each other". The government managed to schedule another meeting on December 4, two days before the start of the *satyagraha* programme at Ayodhya.

A significant decision emerged at this meeting. The government suggested to the two groups that they should submit detailed documents in support of their claim to the disputed shrine. The suggestion was accepted and the VHP and the Muslim

leaders agreed to submit documents to the government which would be exchanged by the government. Even though this was not the first time that the government had initiated a move to enable both sides to present their case the VHP had submitted documents to Buta Singh in 1988 but the initiative was significant as it gave a reprieve to the government on the Ayodhya front. It did not have to contend with the RSS clan determined to precipitate matters in Ayodhya. However, it has also to be kept in mind that the period after the kar seva programme was utilised by the BJP to consolidate on the gains of the past months and to make some important organisational changes.

The documents were submitted by the two groups and the government handed over the papers of the VHP to the Muslim leaders and vice versa. A third meeting was scheduled for January 10 and it was decided that the documents could be categorised into four groups: Historical; archaeological; legal and revenue. The meeting also "resolved that these documents be examined by experts on the subject". The two groups were asked by the government to submit the list of experts who would represent them at another scheduled meeting on January 24. It had been two months since the government headed by Chandrasekhar had assumed office and there had been relative tranquillity on the Ayodhya dispute. There were views that the government had made the right move, but the fact is that the negotiations suited every political group. There was also no possibility of a compromise emerging as at every meeting, the two sides reiterated their known positions and indicated that they would not budge from it. This was particularly true of the VHP who declared that it would make no attempt to prove that modern Ayodhya was the actual birth place of Ram. Ashok Singhal declared that "such issues can not be proved and we do not feel the need for it as it is a matter of faith for the majority in this country".

However, if the government had succeeded in preventing another immediate confrontation at Ayodhya, it had failed in

seizing the political initiative from the RSS clan. The VHP staged the satyagraha programme at Ayodhya from December 6 and it continued till January 14 and several thousand VHP activists and religious leaders courted arrest when they were prevented from marching in a group to the Babri Masjid. The programme kept alive the Ram temple issue and gave an opportunity to the neo-converts to feel that they had contributed to the agitation. However, the most ambitious programme was launched by the BJP in the first week of December when nearly two dozen senior BJP leaders fanned out in the country to address public gatherings and stage demonstrations. They were to be accompanied by the local leaders and the aim was to take the "message from Ayodhya to the people".

In what was a virtual launch of an elections campaign, more than 300 districts were to be covered by the leaders. The campaign was the most extensive ever planned by the BJP and it envisaged the leaders spending a total number of 195 man days on tour by the leaders. The routes of all the leaders were prepared by a small group of party managers in the capital and it was decided that Advani would tour those areas not covered by his Rath Yatra. The programme was a resounding success with people flocking to the venue of the gatherings to listen to the BJP leaders. Intelligence reports noted the positive response of the people towards the BJP and it was also apparent that the BJP was getting support not just for the Ram temple dispute, but also for its view that the Ayodhya agitation was primarily a part of a bigger struggle against the "forces of pseudo-secularism".

Even as the process of negotiations started, the VHP made a significant departure from its contention that an ancient Ram temple had been destroyed by Babur to build the mosque. This was in addition to the argument of the VHP that the onus of proving the place at the birthplace did not wrest with them, the VHP leaders also changed tack on the concept of the period when the Ram temple was built. While earlier, it was argued that the temple had been built during the reign of the dynasty of the

Vikramadityas between the third and eight centuries A.D., it was now contended that the temple had been an eleventh century temple. The process of negotiations were also marred by the virulent attack by the VHP and scholars owing allegiance to it, on the "Marxist historians". Just as the RSS clan had argued that the Nehruvian model was largely responsible for all the socio-political ills of India. It was now contended that "distortions in the understanding of Indian history has crept in because the Marxist historians have applied western tools".

What precipitated matters further was the fact that several leading historians from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in the capital released a historical pamphlet entitled 'Political Abuse of History' in which it was contended that Babur had not demolished a temple to build mosque, and also that there was no evidence to link Ram with contemporary Ayodhya. These historians were requested by the Muslim leadership to represent them in the negotiations, an offer which was declined and the argument was the issue had become too politicised. While the Muslim leadership succeeded in goading another set of liberal historians in participating in the talks as neutral experts, it was evident that the academic exercise of the historians from JNU had come a bit too late in the day as the argument sounded convincing only to those who already believed in the contention. Had the academic exercise come earlier, it might have gone a long way in taking the wind out of the sails of the VHP campaign, but that unfortunately did not happen.

By the time 1990 drew to a close almost all institutions in India were taking sides in the raging dispute. This was most evident in the media coverage on the kar seva programme when the vernacular press of Uttar Pradesh, particularly came under scrutiny for falsifying facts and aiding the spread of the arguments of the VHP. The Press Council of India took up the charges of biased reporting during the kar seva programme and concluded that there were evidences of sections of the media playing a partisan role by misreporting incidents and exaggerating the

number of VHP activists killed in police firing. The RSS clan had succeeded in polarising not just politics into a 'us versus them' situation, but also other institutions in India, including the media. This greatly helped the BJP in the coming months especially during the 1991 elections when the the BJP increased its strength in Parliament and emerged as the main opposition party.

Even before the academics holding divergent views on the Ayodhya dispute met in the capital on January 24, it was clear that there was little hope of a negotiated settlement as the RSS clan had embarked on a multi-pronged campaign drive which among things entailed staging a massive rally in the capital where all religious leaders associated with the Ayodhya campaign would declare "war on the government" if it did not facilitate the building of the Ram temple. A government paper recorded that at the January 24 meeting there were "disagreements on many points". Prior to this meeting, the VHP had also declared that the "dialogue is confined to scholarly pursuits, it is not a judicial dialogue. None of these documents is meant for any judicial or semi-judicial process in any court of law or any committee...since we have all along maintained that no court of law can ever hope to decide the Ram Janmabhoomi issue". However, the talks threatening to break off, the government succeeded in scheduling another meeting for February 6 and the government also pledged to the two groups that it would compare the documents with the originals and attest the authenticity of the papers. The next meeting between the experts was more acrimonious and even though the government was formally asked to speed up the process of authentication, there were indications that the process of negotiations were coming to a naught. Political developments leading to the dissolution of the Lok Sabha and the announcement of elections overtook the process of negotiations even before the process of authentication could be completed. After the new government assumed office in June 1991, the move was practically abandoned.

The BJP however, fresh from the success of its month long campaign drive, held its plenary session at Jaipur where the main item on its agenda was the formal 'election' of a new party president. Murli Manohar Joshi's name had already been "cleared" by religious leaders associated with the Ayodhya agitation and other affiliates of the RSS. In his last speech as party president, Advani highlighted the two biggest achievements of the BJP during his tenure. The first was that the BJP was "no longer a peripheral party;" and the second was that the party was "no longer reacting to issues raised by the ruling party," but was "setting the agenda of the political debate". The BJP leader elaborated his contention and rightly claimed that the BJP had "come to occupy centre-stage in national politics". There was a realisation in the party that it occupied the pivotal position, but the main problem was that the BJP was still seen as a single issue party. To alter this image, one of the first decisions of the BJP after the change of guard was to give a popular economic edge to its campaign plank. A new slogan Ram and Roti was thrown up and it was argued that both were equally important for the complete upliftment of Indians.

However, the economic resolution adopted by the national council at Jaipur failed to present any new analysis and the BJP continued with its traditional opposition to planned economy. Besides adding a new slogan to its repertoire, the BJP also tried to broaden its concern by announcing other actions plans. The second fortnight of May was to be observed as the 'Farmers Fortnight' during which period the party would "highlight the problems of farmers and seek redressal for their grievances". The BJP also decided to observe the death anniversary of Bhagat Singh the radical freedom fighter who had been sentenced to death by the colonial rulers. Starting from March 23 the martyrdom day of Singh the BJP planned to stage rallies and public meetings in the state of Punjab to "enlighten the broad masses on the seriousness of the Punjab situation". The BJP also decided to take up the issue of the Kashmir problem in a big way and

declared that its leaders would lead a march to Srinagar where the Indian tricolour would be hoisted by Joshi on June 23, the death anniversary of Syama Prasad Mookerjee. An analysis of the issues that the BJP sought to take up in February 1991, suggests that the party leadership was consciously projecting itself as a "patriotic and nationalistic party" which felt that the priority areas in the country were the problems of various centrifugal forces gaining ground.

In the four and a half years since the elevation of Advani as party president, the BJP had registered manifold growth. Its support base had expanded greatly and the party had made inroads outside the traditional social groups that rallied behind the Jana Sangh and the BJP earlier. The BJP had also been able to shed its image of being primarily an Upper-caste party. However, this growth had been as a result of the party's direct participation in the Ram temple agitation and skillful conduct of the agitation. But, in the process, the party was known for little else besides the temple plank and the pressure was clearly on the leadership to broad base its concern for attracting more supporters into its fold. The BJP leaders by this time had also started arguing that the party was a government in waiting and this could not be justified if the party continued as a single issue party. Issues which had been relegated to the background due to the stranglehold of the Ayodhya dispute, were sought to be brought to the fore again.

The decision to highlight the problem of militancy in the states of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir were a part of the concerted attempt on the part of the BJP to broaden its platform. The economic content was also inserted to ward off criticism that the BJP had little or no economic programme. However, the political events in India following the Congress withdrawing support from the government in the first week of March, overtook the BJP and all attempts of the BJP to project itself as a party with a comprehensive programme, proved elusive, and for the second time the party was forced to contest the elections primarily on



the temple plank. All the planned programmes excluding the VHP organised rally in the capital, had to be abandoned, and the public gathering underscored that the BJP had few issues to highlight in the elections save the Ayodhya dispute. This however, had its impact on the party in the long run and even after the emergence of the BJP as the main opposition party the party failed to widen the base of its programme, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the party had little chances of immediate enlargement of its policy base as it converted the elections for the four state assemblies as a 'virtual referendum' on the entire gamut of issues it had raised in the course of the Ayodhya agitation.

However, in early 1991, even as negotiations were continuing between the VHP and the Muslim leadership, the former embarked on a path to further broaden its support base and give a direct political shape to the agitation conducted by it. Shortly after the end of the satyagraha programme at Ayodhya, religious leaders in the VHP fold met at Allahabad during the kumbh mela and announced that it would organise a public rally in the capital on April 4 to press for the right to start temple construction. The rally was planned on a massive scale and even the smallest of VHP units in the rural and urban centres were instructed to ensure maximum participation from the area. The rally was to be preceded by a meeting of the Kendriya Margdarshak Mandal and a two-day Dharam Sansad. When the programme was announced, it was essentially a tactic to keep the organisational network of the VHP active and ensure that the cadre did not fritter away since there was a lull on the Ram temple front. The BJP also pledged to make the rally a success by declaring during its plenary session that its cadre was being instructed to participate in the VHP programme. The programme was billed as a show of strength to demonstrate to the adversaries of the RSS clan that the affiliates could mobilise a large number of people even outside Ayodhya. However, the political developments transformed dramatically after the Congress declared that it was withdrawing support from the government.

**The Lok Sabha was dissolved and elections were imminent. The April 4 public meeting and the related meetings of the VHP affiliates thus were transformed into a “launching pad” for the BJP to start its campaign for the elections.**

### **Preparing For Elections**

**The VHP and the BJP started working as a well oiled machinery and drew up extensive plans for the rally. The VHP was entrusted with the organisational aspects of the programme and the BJP was given the responsibility of attracting the crowds to the meeting. The VHP appealed to its traditional supporters the traders to down their shutters on the day of the rally and converge on the lawns of the Boat Club in the capital. The organisation announced the formation of 18 sub-committees to manage various aspects of the programme, ranging from transport, boarding, lodging to decoration. The sub-committee in charge of decoration declared that it would erect the biggest stage ever to have come up at the venue of the rally. The big stage would have place for close to one hundred leaders from various RSS affiliates to sit on and it would be decorated with motifs of Ram, other religious symbols and the elections symbol of the BJP, the lotus. The VHP announced that it was aiming to mobilise two million people for the rally but would be happy if “even one fourth of the target” converged in Delhi on April 14. On March 19, more than ten days after the Congress had withdrawn support to the government and the President had asked Chandrasekhar to continue as care taken prime minister, the BJP made it obvious that the party was viewing the April 4 meeting as its first elections rally when it was announced that senior party leaders would tour India extensively in the fortnight before the meeting to motivate people to come to Delhi.**

**The leaders were to fan out in various parts of the country by the third week of March and would arrive in Delhi on the day of the rally accompanied by bands of supporters. Advani was to**

first head for Calcutta and then hit the dusty trail in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Vajpayee was to tour the areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh that were not being covered by Advani. Joshi was to first go to Kerala and after that to Bombay and drive through Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Sikandar Bhakt, one of the few Muslims in the BJP leadership was to tour the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Haryana, while other junior leaders were to tour other areas not covered by the senior leaders. It was obvious that though the ostensible reason for staging the rally was to demand the right to start temple construction at Ayodhya, the real reason in the changed political circumstances was to give the BJP a headstart over other political parties. Even though the dates of the elections had not been announced, the BJP was sensing a greater role for itself in Parliament and it was felt that by identifying itself with the religious identity of the Hindus, the BJP would be benefited. No eyebrows were raised in the party when it was announced that senior party leaders would share the platform with religious leaders. The strategy was obvious: Secure religious sanctity by rubbing shoulders with the shankaracharyas and other religious leaders. The VHP had been entrusted with the job of ensuring that none of the assertions of the clergy went against the programmes of the BJP and embarrassed the leaders.

However, the apprehensions of the BJP leadership were misplaced as when the Dharam Sansad took up the resolutions to be adopted, they appeared to be a virtual endorsement of the BJP manifesto. In a carefully worded political resolution, the thousand odd religious leaders called upon the electorate to "use their vote power prudently and in an organised manner. The resolution argued that the prime reason for the country facing a threat from within was because the majority of political parties had been wedded to pseudo-secularism" and made it their one point programme to keep on licking the boots of communal elements and weakening Hindu society...the national society in Bharat." The Sansad further resolved that the Hindus had to be

determined to elect "devoted, patriotic representatives of good character ... keeping clearly in view the political polarisation that had come about in the form of Ram Bhakts and Ram Drohis". The resolution, after the initial arguments detailed a 16 point list and instructed the Hindu voters to vote only for the political party that promised to fulfill the demands of the Sansad.

There however, was little difference between the list released by the Sansad and the BJP programme as it talked about a Uniform Civil Code, abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, to prevent illegal infiltration from Bangladesh, and of course the handing over of the of the three shrines at Ayodhya, Mathura and Varanasi to the Hindus. In a separate resolution, the Sansad also congratulated the BJP for the "active support extended for the reconstruction of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi temple". By the time the April 4 programme commenced shortly after noon, a senior religious leader lit a lamp, an all encompassing Hindu unity had been forged and the BJP was projected as the only party capable and committed to protect the political interests of the Hindus. Never before had any political party launched its elections campaign with such categorical religious overtones. Speaker after speaker at the rally spoke about the need to forge and maintain Hindu unity and how this could be best articulated by the BJP. The issue of building the Ram temple, though not singled out, was however central as the religious leaders coined a new slogan *Jo Hamare Ram Ka Naheen, Woh Hamare Kaam Ka Naheen* (He who does not belong to Ram is of little use to us).

The BJP's elections campaign had been launched and thousands came to the capital to attend the rally. While the target of 2 million was not met, the rally was one of the biggest ever staged in the city and when the participants returned home, they carried with them the message of the revered religious leaders that Hindu society was imperiled and this could be halted only if the people turned out in large numbers and voted for the BJP. The BJP had definitely secured a headstart and throughout the election campaign, it clung on to this lead by efficient organisational

management and as the results demonstrated, the party greatly benefited when it bagged 119 Lok Sabha constituencies and emerged as the second largest party giving it the status of the main opposition party and Advani the status of a cabinet minister by virtue of his being the leader of the Opposition.

Similar to the situation in the aftermath of the shilanyas ceremony in 1989, there was little talk of building the Ram temple after the successful rally on April 4. The emphasis of the entire RSS clan was in ensuring the victory of the maximum number of BJP candidates. Elections were announced for May, and the BJP began their selection of candidates, well in advance of other political parties. A new feature this time was the decision of a number of retired civil servants and senior army officers to join the BJP. Heading the list was T.N. Chaturvedi, who had a controversial run as the Comptroller and Auditor General of India during the tenure of Rajiv Gandhi for his special role in questioning several aspects of controversial defense deals. There were others also like Brijesh Mishra, the former Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, Lieutenant General C.P. Candeth. Several former Congress leaders also joined the BJP as did noted film stars Victor Banerjee, Deepika Chikhaliah and Arvind Trivedi who had played the roles of Sita and Ravan in the television serial 'The Ramayan'. Among the new entrants to the BJP was also former Chambal valley dacoit Tehsildar Singh. The new entrants were largely instrumental in bolstering the prospects of the party as it was seen as the emerging political force towards whom diverse people were flocking to.

The BJP fielded candidates in all states in an attempt to project itself as an all India party whose support base was not restricted to the northern and western states. Barring Maharashtra, where the BJP continued with its alliance with the Shiv Sena, the party did not forge any electoral alliance with other political parties. A concerted bid was made by the BJP to make inroads in the southern states, especially the states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The 1991 elections were the first that the BJP was contesting without

**any understanding with a national party, and the leadership was conscious that the results would have great impact on the claims of the party that it was a government-in-waiting. However, there were marginal contradictions between the RSS and the BJP over the basic aim during the elections. For the RSS, the main concern was to ensure the political eclipse of the Janata Dal led by V.P. Singh for the decision to implement the Mandal Commission report without adding an economic dimension, was seen by the leadership as the main obstacle in the all encompassing Hindu solidarity.**

**However, for the BJP while the defeat of V.P. Singh was certainly a desired goal, the party was more keen on improving its strength in the Lok Sabha. There were reports that the RSS leadership would undertake a review of the election process shortly before polling date and in constituencies witnessing a triangular contest, the RSS would consider transferring the votes of its cadre to even the non-BJP candidates if they were in a pivotal position to defeat the Janata Dal candidate. The RSS leadership argued that the anti-Mandal Commission votes could not be allowed to get divided as this would benefit the JD and in the long run prevent Hindu consolidation. There were also contradictions within the BJP over the nomination of several neo-converts to contest the elections from several constituencies. A number of traditional leaders of the party felt that this would dilute the ideological content of the BJP.**

**However, the criticism was warded off by the section of leadership in favour of the BJP opening its doors, by contending that it was a tactical move to ensure charismatic candidates. The BJP also fielded a number of candidates who came to be known as the party's saffron brigade. They included several religious leaders associated with the Ayodhya agitation and some other leaders who had been drawn from the VHP fold. These new entrants to the BJP included Mahant Avidyanath who defected to the BJP from the Hindu Mahasabha, Swami Chinmayanand, S.C. Dixit, the retired Director General of Uttar Pradesh police,**

and Vinay Katiyar, the president of Bajrang Dal who was given the challenging task of wresting the Faizabad constituencies from the communists. Uma Bharti who was also a member of the saffron brigade, was again put up from her old constituency, but she had problems in the initial part of the campaign and the alienation between her and the party cadre was sorted out only after Govindacharya visited the constituency and settled things. By the time the campaign had entered the decisive phase it was more or less certain that the electorate would again not give any party a majority and that phase of minority governments would continue.

There was also an all-round consensus that the BJP would increase its strength and also widen its support base in regional terms. Even though the BJP did not emerge as the largest party in the Lok Sabha when the results were declared, the 1991 elections were the second general elections where the main political agenda was set by the BJP. The main success of the BJP was that it had dictated the parameters of the debate during the campaign period greatly succeeded in ideologically isolating itself from other political parties, and even though all non-BJP parties did not form a united platform, it was clear that the process of political realignment had been initiated in India. It was also evident that in the coming years, the BJP would emerge as single pole in a bi-polar polity with the other parties forming the other pole. The BJP's position was akin to that of the Congress in its heydays when the Congress gained the most when the opposition was divided and suffered when the other parties closed ranks like in 1967 and 1977.

The new position of the BJP was most evident in Uttar Pradesh where the BJP secured a majority in the state assembly, elections for which were simultaneously held, by polling slightly more than 30 per cent of the total votes cast. In the majority of constituencies, the elections were four-cornered as the two factions of the Janata and the Congress failed to arrive at any understanding. This greatly helped the BJP and the trend of the BJP emerging as the principal pole continued with the party

facing a threat only from a united front against it. A leader of the BJP had been asked during the election campaign whether the BJP would be the alternative to the Congress. He had replied, "we will not be an alternative, but shall be the next Congress".<sup>131</sup> The remark was dismissed as the wise crack of a maverick leader, but as the results of the 1991 elections demonstrated, the claim was coming true. The results of 1991 could have been better from the BJP's viewpoint but for the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi half way into the polling. The postponement and rescheduling of polling led to a sympathy wave for the Congress and had an adverse effect on the prospect of the BJP in several constituencies that went to the polls after the assassination. However, several commentators contended that the only victor in the 1991 elections had been the BJP because the Congress though it formed the government, had failed to secure a majority on its own and depended on the support of its regional allies in the initial months before by-elections and political manoeuvres saw the party more comfortably placed in Parliament.

The BJP declared that its victory in the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh was a "mandate to build the Ram temple". To underline the party's assessment of the result Kalyan Singh, the Chief Minister designate first went to Ayodhya with party president Murli Manohar Joshi to have a *darshan* of the idols in the Babri Masjid and after swearing that his government would ensure the construction of the temple, proceeded to Lucknow to take the oath of office by swearing allegiance to the Constitution. While the declaration was questioned by adversaries of the BJP, the party leadership was also guided by the realisation that it could no longer pursue the path of agitation on Ayodhya as all along the party leaders had proclaimed that they did not believe in the constitutional path. But, the state government was committed to uphold the law of the land. There were contradictions galore as Kalyan Singh had sworn both by the Constitution as well pledged in Ayodhya to construct the temple at all costs. There was also a contradiction within the BJP especially in Uttar Pradesh as the



majority of legislators were first-timers and had little knowledge and understanding of the process of good governance. However, Kalyan Singh a member of the Backward caste selected consciously by the leadership to head the government to negate charges of the party being an Upper-caste based party was quick to come to terms with the process of governance and promised the VHP leadership that his government would "slowly remove all hurdles in the way of the Ram temple". However, whenever the Union government quizzed his decisions, Singh declared that he was acting within the parameters of law and had taken no unconstitutional measure. Singh had the support of the entire RSS clan and from conducting an agitation astutely, the fraternity was slowly emerging as shrewd administrators.

### **Changing Priorities**

Following the elections and the installations of the governments at the Centre and in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP contended that the Ayodhya issue "from being a subject of agitation, had become part of the governments' (both the state and Union government) democratic responsibility". However, since one of the first tasks of the Union government was to "reduce the temperature in national politics, the BJP helped more than anyone else".<sup>132</sup> While the real fact of the matter was that the BJP leadership in Uttar Pradesh needed time to come to terms with the fact that it had been voted to power, the party maintained a facade that it was acting "in the overall national interest" and thus not launching a "more aggressive campaign". The approach of the state government was to keep the Ayodhya agitation on "hold" and contend that it was exploring "alternatives besides agitating".

It was also imperative for the BJP to project itself as a party not restricted to a single issue, but a party which had wider national concerns to buttress its claim as a genuine national alternative. The state government initiated a series of meetings with the Muslim leadership at which the representatives of the

government argued that the Muslim community should give up their claims on the land over which the Babri Masjid stood and agree to shift the structure to another place. Though the Muslim leadership rejected the suggestion, the Kalyan Singh government continued with the talks and tried to enlist the support of marginal Shia Muslim leaders who repeatedly issued statements rejected by the majority in the community, that the mosque should be shifted and the land handed over to the Hindus. However, in the months immediately after assuming office, the state government did little besides these meetings. The Union government too took no initiative and instead embarked on a major liberalisation drive on the economic front to shift the national focus from politics to economy which was in shambles.

The national executive of the BJP met for its first session after the elections at Thiruvananthapuram in September and unveiled its new strategy: Relegate the Ram temple issue to the background and project itself as a nationalistic party. Nationalism for the BJP had a Hindu basis and it was argued that the Ayodhya dispute was not the "only one affecting the lives of Hindus". At the executive meeting, another ambitious programme was announced and the party leadership hoped that it would serve the dual purpose of relegating the Ram temple dispute to the background and cementing the BJP's image as a Hindu nationalistic party. The programme was called Ekta Yatra and it entailed party president Murli Manohar Joshi travelling in a specially designed Light Commercial Vehicle from Kanya Kumari, the southern-most point in India to Srinagar in Kashmir where he was to hoist the Indian tricolour on January 26, the Republic Day. Similar to the Rath Yatra undertaken by Advani in 1990, the Ekta Yatra that was started on December 10, was to provide an opportunity to the BJP to canvass support for its notion of nationhood as also elevate the status of Joshi who did not have a national following.

From the time militancy had emerged as a recurring factor in the Kashmir Valley, the Indian tricolour had become an object

of hatred in the region and following the diktats of the militants, the flag could not be hoisted by government officials on ceremonial occasions. The BJP's calculation was that the government, fearing offensive from the militants, would not allow the cavalcade following Joshi's 'rath' into the Valley and detain the BJP leaders. This would enhance the party's nationalistic image as the argument following the government halting the Ekta Yatra would be simple: 'We wanted to go to Kashmir just to hoist the national flag but this government instead of fighting militancy, penalises us for exercising the fundamental right of every Indian'. The political adversaries of the BJP were in a spot in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the Ekta Yatra. There were demands that the Yatra be banned, but sensing the benefit to the BJP from this demand, the Prime Minister refused to act.

Religious motifs were again part of the Ekta Yatra and when the cavalcade started rolling from Kanya Kumari, Joshi's Rath he travelled in a white LCV while another designed like a south Indian temple followed as a standby carried urns containing water from river considered holy by the Hindus. The Indian nation was projected as a deity *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) and the female form was painted on the Rath. At places where the Joshi cavalcade stopped, he would address gatherings and ask people to offer prayers to the deity the idol was installed inside the LCV in a makeshift temple like structure. In his speeches, Joshi projected himself as a dutiful son who had hit the dusty trails to "regain for the mother what was hers". Joshi played his role as a Hindu nationalist to perfection as all his speeches were laced with religious images and he argued that the prime problem in Kashmir was its Muslim majority populace that had not adopted to the ways of India meaning Hindus even after accession to India. Joshi argued in favour of use of brute state power and changing the demographic character of the state to combat militancy.

While the use of religious motifs found increasing support

during the Ekta Yatra, the BJP also gave an opportunity to the youth who had lent muscle power to the Ayodhya agitation. A special group called *kesariya vahini* (saffron army) was raised to accompany Joshi in his march to Kashmir. While a small band of this 'army' accompanied Joshi from the beginning, several thousands of them were to join the cavalcade from Delhi through militancy afflicted Punjab and Kashmir on their way to Srinagar. The youth were enlisted in this army after signing a specially prepared pledge forms in which it was declared that the person was willing to "sacrifice everything" for the cause of Mother India. The *vahini* was raised as a force that would march to the Valley to assert the cultural hegemony of Hindus over the region. When the Ekta Yatra started its 15,000-km-long journey from Kanya Kumari, the RSS clan considered the programme a "real winner" as the understanding was that the government would be forced to halt the Yatra and detain Joshi. In the initial phase of the Yatra there was little hype from the party unlike Advani's Rath Yatra, and Joshi's second in command, Narendra Modi declared that while the first had been a "war-time manoeuvre," Joshi's Yatra was a "peace-time exercise". In this phase which continued till the time the Yatra reached Delhi, the emphasis was not on generating frenzy, but to utilise the occasion to spread the BJP's notion of nationhood and the political adversaries of the RSS clan discovered to their discomfort that people were turning out in large numbers to listen to Joshi and going back convinced that there was some substance in the BJP's arguments.

However, the Ekta Yatra ended in a virtual fiasco primarily stemming from Joshi's over-ambitious drive and P.V. Narasimha Rao's effective strategy of refusing to take punitive action against the BJP leader and others following him. By the time the Yatra reached Delhi, the pressure was mounting on the Union government to halt the Yatra. Primarily at Joshi's insistence, the BJP refused to abandon the programme even though the government cited the problem of providing security to a large number of people accompanying Joshi. While the Yatra was in Punjab,

militants opened fire at a band of *kesariya vahini* members en route to join Joshi and this further buttressed the government contention, that it was virtually impossible to provide security cover to the marchers. By the time the Yatra reached Jammu, several thousand members of the *kesariya vahini* were prepared to march to the Valley. However, the government was in no mood to oblige the BJP by ordering the arrest of its activists. Rather, the government offered to fly Joshi to Srinagar and escort him to Lal Chowk, the main square in the town, providing security cover while he hoisted the flag. Joshi realised that there was no other way for him to reach Srinagar as militancy in the region had reared its head in retaliation to the BJP campaign that among other demands included the call for abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution. But, there was a problem in conveying the decision to the cadre that was prepared for a battle.

Finally, Joshi slipped out from the cavalcade and the cadre when they learnt of the leader's flight were greatly upset and accused him of betraying their cause. The Ekta Yatra ground to a halt and Joshi hoisted the flag on January 26 amidst police presence even as the sound of guns being fired by militants could be heard. Joshi was flown in a specially commissioned government surveillance aircraft and this added to the impression that the BJP had compromised with the government. The members of the *kesariya vahini* who had joined up with Joshi returned home dejected and were further humiliated when people pointed out that their leader had abandoned them. P.V. Narasimha Rao had scored his first political victory over the BJP and Joshi had been exposed as a politician who had failed to draw the line. Had the Ekta Yatra been terminated by the BJP of its own accord and the cadre informed of the decision, the impact of the programme would have been greater as the party would not have been charged of deceit. However, the fiasco of the Ekta Yatra also highlighted the nascent factionalism within the BJP as supporters of Joshi accused other party leaders of spearheading media criticism of Joshi. But, the farcical end of the Ekta Yatra forced

the BJP to return to the issue it could handle and manage best: The Ram temple.

Even as the BJP was drawing up plans for the Ekta Yatra, the state government of Uttar Pradesh and the VHP made quiet moves to construct the temple. The VHP, by use of appeasements and threats managed to acquire a sizable number of plots and buildings adjoining the Babri Masjid from the earlier owners. After the VHP took physical control of these properties, the state government acquired 2.77 acres of land in front of the disputed shrine in the first week of October 1991 ostensibly to "promote tourism and provide amenities to pilgrims". However, the real intent was to transfer the acquired land to the VHP Trust to start constructing the temple even while the legal dispute over the shrine continued. The state government argued that it was delinking the question of building the temple from the disputed shrine. However, it was a clever ploy to serve the twin purpose of appeasing the section of the BJP supporters who were getting restive because of inactivity on the temple front, and also to present the nation with a *fait accompli* as once a portion of the temple was built the programme could no longer be stopped.

The calculation was simple: Once construction was started on a portion of land outside the disputed shrine, the completion of the temple could not be prevented even if the court verdict went in favour of the Muslims. Of the 2.77 acres that the state government acquired, as much as 2.04 was now in the control of the VHP after it succeeded in getting the properties transferred from the original owners. However, the acquisition was challenged in the courts and both the High Court and the Supreme Court ruled that during the pendency of the case, the state government could neither transfer the land to any party, nor build any permanent structure on it. The Court's ruling upset the plans of the BJP and the VHP, but the state government nonetheless started demolishing the buildings on the acquired land. While there were a howl of protests at the demolitions, the state government contended that the court had barred construction but had been silent regarding demolitions. In

a matter of weeks, the entire area in front of the Babri Masjid which once was a graveyard had been levelled.

Even though the Union government could have stepped in the moment the state government started demolishing the building on the acquired land, it did not act. The refusal of the government to act was similar to the failure of the earlier governments to foresee the plan of the RSS clan and take pre-emptive steps. Arjun Singh, a senior Minister in the Narasimha Rao government felt that the government lost its chance by not acting the moment the demolitions started. He said that at that time the BJP and the VHP did not have much public support to the demolitions as several of them were minor temples. But, for reasons which the Minister was unwilling to disclose the government failed to react.<sup>133</sup> This was also the first time that it became apparent that there were two views within the ruling party on how to combat the BJP. One group was in favour of strong action, while the other advocated primarily by the Prime Minister was in favour of continuing the strategy adopted during the Ekta Yatra.

Meanwhile, the state government made no effort to prevent an assembly of VHP activists in Ayodhya for a programme on October 30 to mark the hoisting of saffron flags over the Babri Masjid a year earlier. The programme was called *shaurya divas* (Valor Day) and a religious ritual was scheduled in memory of the kar sevaks who had died in the clash with the police. The programme was marked by the attitude of the state police, who made no attempt to stop the VHP activists from entering the Babri Masjid and after hoisting saffron flags on top of the domes, damaged a portion of the outer wall of the shrine complex. This led to a furore and a scheduled meeting of the National Integration Council was stormy as it was attended by the BJP after it initially threatened to stay away. The meeting was an administrative success for the Union government as the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister pledged to protect the disputed structure till a final solution was found for the dispute. Kalyan Singh also committed his government to obey the orders of the High Court.

However, it was clear that while the political adversaries were buoyant at forcing the BJP to affirm by the Constitution, for the party leadership, it was mere lip service when they supported the resolution adopted at the meeting.

The BJP did not oppose the NIC resolution, but the state government continued the actions that dramatically altered the situation in Ayodhya. A Union government paper has detailed the conduct of the state government in this period and recorded that "certain security measures were progressively dismantled". The state government also started building a brick wall cordoning off the land that was acquired by the government. However, "the alignment of the wall was quite different from the alignment recommended (by a team of Central experts)".<sup>134</sup> The true intent of the state government was also evident in its decision to hand over 42.09 acres of land in the vicinity of the disputed complex to the VHP Trust to implement a long standing project of designing and building a Ram Katha Park. The state government also allowed the VHP to perform *bhumi puja* for another temple, called Sheshavtar Lakshman temple inside the acquired land. Throughout the first half of 1992, the state government made steady progress towards slowly handing over the disputed shrine and the land around it to the VHP.

However, the Union government though aware of the developments, took no measure to thwart the plans. Around this time, the Prime Minister's strategy started surfacing: Narasimha Rao wanted to try, like V.P. Singh had attempted, to split the ranks of the temple supporters by creating schisms within the VHP and the religious leaders. Rao and his officials were of the considered view that while the VHP had a strong case, the VHP and other affiliates of the RSS could not be allowed to get political credit for overseeing the temple construction. In his meetings with the religious leaders, the Prime Minister argued that the VHP should not be allowed to build the temple and instead, the religious leaders should find other non-political alternatives. However, like V.P. Singh, Rao also failed and as subsequent



events underlined, his inaction in the first half of 1992 only benefited the RSS clan. This was also the period when Rao's 'soft Hindutva' approach became apparent and this was met with opposition in the ruling party. The apparent bonhomie between Rao and Advani also came to the fore and on occasions it appeared that the prime Minister was working in tandem with the RSS clan on the Ram temple issue. Several commentators argued that while the Ayodhya dispute could be settled in favour of the Hindus, the credit should not go to the BJP or other RSS affiliates. This could be done only if the Congress 'saffronised' itself marginally.

By May 1992, the state government had completed most of the groundwork in Ayodhya and the stage was set for another round of escalation of tension in the temple-town. The ball was set rolling again at the *Kumbh Mela*, this time in Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, where religious leaders associated with the VHP met and announced that kar seva would be resumed from July 9. This was conveyed to the Prime Minister on May 8 when a delegation of the religious leaders met him to inform of the decision. The BJP contended that Rao was silent for the greater part of the meeting and pleaded with the religious leaders to keep politics away from the issue as "*dharmic* (religious) matters should be resolved in *dharmic* ways".<sup>135</sup> The religious leaders agreed and asked Rao to restart the process of negotiations initiated by Chandrasekhar. However, the government did little in the two months before kar seva started in Ayodhya and the issue became tricky as the programme was violative of the High Court order. Work started on the portion of acquired land in front of the Babri Masjid that had been earlier levelled by the state government.

The VHP activists started building a three-tiered platform and contended that the platform though made with concrete, was not a permanent structure. The kar seva programme continued for 18 days with the Union government taking no administrative step to prevent the construction work. The state government provided all possible help to the VHP and for more than a

fortnight, nights merged into day in the temple-town as thousands of kar sevaks would lie huddled together in the massive tents that were erected in the acquired land. Concrete mixers continued to churn throughout and the platform steadily started rising in height. Loud speakers blared devotional songs rendered to the tune of various popular Hindi film songs. After the Union government's strategy of judicially preventing any further construction failed, Rao, met with religious leaders on July 23 and succeeded in securing a breather. The programme was stopped on July 26 and the Prime Minister declared that the process of negotiations was being restarted.

A significant achievement of the Prime Minister in this period was his ability to bring the fissures within the RSS clan to the fore. It was becoming increasingly evident that various groups were in favour of different strategies on the Ayodhya issue. There were sharp differences between the VHP and a section of the religious leaders also on the method to be followed. While a section that came to be known as the hard-liners, wanted to precipitate matters immediately and continue with the construction programme, others wanted to continue with the strategy of the Uttar Pradesh government of slowly inching towards the disputed shrine without providing the Union government any immediate provocation to dismiss the state government. However, too much was read into these fissures as they were purely over tactical matters. There were no differences on the two real issues: A Ram temple must be built in place of the Babri Masjid; and the political credit should go to the BJP and other RSS affiliates.

Even though the government succeeded in halting construction work, Muslims in several parts of the country started doubting the ability and the commitment of the government to protect the Babri Masjid. In an attempt to secure the support of the Muslims in north India, Arjun Singh started touring these areas and found support for his demand to adopt a harder stance towards the BJP and other RSS affiliates. Muslims who had moved away from the Congress fold realised that the division

of anti-BJP votes in the 1991 elections had not benefited the community and in several parts of north-India, politics was fast moving towards a sharp polarisation between the BJP and other political forces. This was predictably viewed with satisfaction by the BJP as it was in tune with its understanding that the party would first prefer to 'bask in splendid isolation before the final assault on power'.

## **Back to Square One**

The BJP contended that the "moment the kar seva pressure eased, things were back to their frozen state".<sup>136</sup> However, the Union government's position is at variance and it claimed that a series of steps were taken immediately after the suspension of the kar seva programme. A Union government paper records its actions thus: "The Prime Minister held a series of wide-ranging consultations with the parties concerned in order to ascertain their views. In addition, the Prime Minister met religious leaders, persons from the media, representatives of political groups, eminent persons, and others. Specific points that arose in these consultations were followed up for authentication, analysis and comments by the Avodhya cell (the formation of the special cell headed by a senior retired bureaucrat with mandate to work directly through the Prime Minister's office was announced by the Prime Minister a day after the suspension of kar seva)".<sup>137</sup> While there is little truth in the BJP claim that the government took no initiative to settle the dispute, government papers relating to its action reveal that there was no sense of urgency as it was only by the end of September that the "stage had been reached where the process of formal negotiations between the representative of the VHP and the AIBMAC could be meaningfully resumed".

There were two factors behind the lack of urgency on the part of the government. Ever since the government embarked on the path of economic liberalisation in July 1991, the Ram temple issue

had been relegated to the background and the economy was the main national issue. The second factor was the spectacle of the RSS clan beset with its own problems. Ever since the government had embarked on the path of economic liberalisation and dismantling the Nehruvian model of development and planning, the BJP and other RSS affiliates were caught in a piquant situation because, as a senior BJP leader confessed, the Congress had started implementing the BJP election manifesto.<sup>138</sup> Throughout 1991 and the early part of 1992, the BJP was engaged in evolving a cogent economic policy which without opposing economic liberalisation, would be markedly different from that of the ruling party. Initial efforts had failed and senior leaders of the RSS clan often projected contrasting views on issues ranging from the entry of foreign capital to the Dunkel Draft on trade agreement.

The RSS clan was also witnessing personality clashes between various leaders and differences in perception over the tone adopted on the Ayodhya issue. The personality clash had seen the shunting of party general secretary Govindacharya to Madras. There was little policy difference between Govindacharya and the rest of the party leadership the main grouse against Govindacharya being his rapid rise in the party, his unorthodox methods of working, and scant regard for hierarchy. The clash was acrimonious and allegations were hurled against Govindacharya, including an occasion when a senior office-bearer of the party accused Govindacharya of being in league with the Intelligence Bureau and also accused him of instigating press reports that insinuated charges against other party leaders.<sup>139</sup>

Finally 'big brother' from Nagpur had to step in to resolve the dispute and a temporary truce was worked out in May 1992 during the executive meeting in Gandhinagar in the state of Gujarat. Advani had maintained a low profile in this clash and this was not to the liking of Govindacharya's supporters who felt that Advani should have supported his one-time political

secretary. However, Advani's supporters felt that by involving himself in the controversy, he would reduce his status to that of a faction leader. The problem of factionalism in the RSS clan was also acutely felt over the Ayodhya issue as VHP leaders led by Ashok Singhal wanted an immediate settlement while the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and others wanted some more time to resolve the issue. The RSS clan also witnessed the hawks on the Ayodhya issue finding allies among the conservatives on the economic front and this added to the prevailing chaos within the RSS and its affiliates. The RSS clan was speaking in so many voices in the first half of 1992 that, *India Today*, a leading magazine, contended that it was no longer a 'joint Hindu family.' The government was lulled into complacency on account of these developments within the RSS clan and continued with the policy of drift like previous governments interspersed with fire-fighting exercises when the RSS clan brought matters to a boil.

The BJP had claimed that the VHP and other RSS affiliates were getting exasperated with government inaction and this led to Ashok Singhal declaring in the third week of September that the religious leaders would meet in the capital for two days from 30 October to decide on the date for resuming construction. The VHP leader declared that while the organisation was "ready to cooperate with the government, it was being made fully ready for confrontation". In hindsight, the declaration of Singhal appears to have been a strategy of the RSS clan to resolve internal problems and regain centre-stage in the Indian political theatre by resorting to the use of an issue, that it could manage best. However, the process of negotiations was started by the government and the two groups were invited to send their representatives to a scheduled meeting on October 3. The meeting was chaired by the Union Home Minister and attended by Sharad Pawar, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat and Subodh Kant Sahay who had played significant roles in bringing the two groups to the negotiating table in 1991. A government paper says that the meeting was "held in a cordial atmosphere and it was

resolved...negotiations should be further proceeded with".<sup>140</sup> The second meeting was fixed for October 16 at which the two groups were to exchange the submissions. By the time the second meeting was held, it was clear that the pattern of 1991 was being followed and there was little hope of anything positive emerging as none of the two groups diluted their stand and retained their rigidity on the basic point. However, the government maintained that it had to oversee the negotiations till the point of its collapse.

Even while the farcical round of negotiations continued, the RSS clan opted to precipitate matters and Ashok Singhal and the RSS leaders declared that the three-month moratorium that the Prime Minister had sought, expired in the last week of October. And since the government had failed to resolve the dispute, the VHP was free to go ahead with its construction plans. The religious leaders assembled in Delhi on October 30 and after deliberating for two days announced that the kar seva programme would be resumed from December 6. The Union government claimed the decision had been taken suddenly while the BJP argued that there were straws in the wind from the time the programme was suspended in July. The negotiations between the VHP and the Muslim leadership collapsed formally on November 8 when the Muslim leaders asserted that there was little sense in continuing with the charade as the kar seva programme was "hanging like the Damocles' sword". A government paper also records the collapse of the talks and details the government action at this point by stating that after the collapse of negotiations, the government "considered advisable" to "talk to each group separately and in an effort to narrow down the differences and bring about a congenial atmosphere for further negotiations".<sup>141</sup>

However, neither were the differences narrowed down, nor negotiations resumed. But, the government initiated a series of frantic manoeuvres ranging from attempting to split the ranks of the religious leaders with the VHP to informal discussions with leaders in the RSS clan through Union Ministers and other

emissaries. The strategy adopted was similar to that followed by the National Front government. At all meetings, the leaders of the RSS clan argued that the government should expedite the judicial verdict on the land acquisition case the High Court had reserved judgment in the first week of November after hearing the arguments of the warring sides. At the meetings, the leaders of the BJP, RSS and the VHP contended that the kar seva programme could be started on the acquired land leaving the disputed shrine intact regardless of the nature of the court verdict. The BJP argued that even if the judgment of the High Court went against the state government and the acquisition was quashed, kar seva could legally start as the VHP owned 2.04 acres of the land and it was free to construct on it. It was a clever piece of argument and highlighted the shrewd legal strategy employed by the RSS clan from the time the BJP came to power in Uttar Pradesh.

While the situation by mid-November warranted a political decision by the government, it sidestepped its constitutional duties. Instead of combating the BJP politically the Union government dithered from taking action and in the process became a passive participant in the demolition. The Prime Minister had succeeded by the third week of November to politically isolate the BJP and other RSS affiliates, but he refused to be drawn out of his somnambulist posture. The proximity of the Prime Minister with several senior leaders of the RSS clan lulled him into complacency and he believed in their assertions that the Supreme Court order would not be violated. The ruling party was smug when the state government clarified to the Supreme Court that kar seva would consist of singing bhajans and kirtans. Supporters of the Prime Minister argued that the government had scored a tactical victory by forcing the RSS clan and the state to commit itself to protecting the Babri Masjid and preventing definite construction activity before the High Court verdict.

However, the RSS clan had adopted the forked tongue by the last week of November. Realising that the political credibility of

the BJP would be greatly damaged if the kar seva programme was either postponed or altered, it adopted the strategy of assuring the government and the courts that it would not violate any judicial order, while the party organisation continued to mobilise kar sevaks to Ayodhya. Advani was launched on his third Yatra and Joshi on his second, to travel through the countryside in Uttar Pradesh. While the former launched himself from Varanasi, the latter used Mathura as his launching pad. In one of his speeches, Advani declared that kar seva would be performed with bricks and shovels and not by merely singing devotional songs.

Emissaries of the Prime Minister who met religious leaders camping in Ayodhya were also told that kar seva would be genuine and the government also had intelligence reports that there were plans to demolish the Babri Masjid. However, the government took no cognizance of these assertions and reports, but relied on the assurance given by the Uttar Pradesh government. The events preceding the demolition of the Babri Masjid underscored the inability of the government to seize initiative and highlighted that it could do little besides belatedly react to developments. Similarly, the RSS clan was also exposed as a fraternity that had lost control over its supporters. Political logic was against the demolition of the Babri Masjid as the BJP had little to gain immediately. Narasimha Rao clearly had great faith in the ability of the RSS leadership to prevent the immediate demolition of the shrine, a trust, that few besides him even in the RSS clan shared.

## **Losing Control**

The Ayodhya agitation had greatly overgrown its patrons. The RSS clan was no longer the only political grouping backing the movement. The Shiv Sena, once an ally of the BJP, was tactically pursuing an independent course because of "lack of sincerity to better the lot of Hindus,"<sup>142</sup> and it mobilised its cadre to reach



Ayodhya and act independent of the the RSS clan. Even among the neo-converts to the RSS fold, there were several who were more boisterous and saw the Ram temple issue primarily from the point of view of demolishing the Babri Masjid to 'wipe out the symbol of national shame'. The temple-town was literally bursting at its seams and when reports of such a large assembly reached Advani, he pleaded with his audience, to go to Ayodhya in a phased manner. The VHP on its part formally declared on December 5 that kar seva not amounting to construction would start the next day and go on till the High Court verdict was delivered following which construction would start in real earnest. Though the Union government repeatedly traded charges with the government of Uttar Pradesh over issues like stationing of Central security forces, on the eve of the kar seva programme, the Union government was confident that the programme would be conducted in the manner as promised by the state government and felt no reason to take preventive measures.

December 6, 1992 was the RSS clan's hour of triumph. The Ram temple issue patronised by the clan since 1984 was not only slowly inching towards the final goal, but the broader issues that had surfaced during the course of the agitation, had been cemented in the political agenda of India. The assault on the political system, evolved after Independence, had been successful and the new order could not be wished away. By skillful machinations, the clan had overseen the defeat of the Congress led by Rajiv Gandhi, ensured the collapse of the National Front government within eleven months of its assuming office, and had planned the BJP's rise as a significant pole in Indian polity that would not fade away in the near future. In the build-up to the kar seva programme of December 6, the clan had also succeeded in bringing fissures within the ruling party to the fore. The government had been demonstrated as weak-kneed and as one which had little political anticipation. Other political parties had been rendered totally ineffective. Ayodhya was the central question in the minds of not just Indians,

but the world over, people with relations social, political, intellectual, religious, or even oblique, with India, were concerned about what would happen in the small township in central India the next day.

It is too early for a distanced historical analysis of the events of December 6. There have been reports and photographs of some leaders of the RSS clan jumping with joy at seeing the domes of the Babri Masjid coming down in a whirl of dust. Other reports mention sad, forlorn, dejected, unhappy faces. This day was a watershed for India as it was the most significant milestone in the biggest mass agitation since the national movement. Various possibilities have been projected for the future of the Indian nation state, all primarily in the realm of unresolved theoretical formulations. However, even as the dust of the collapsed Babri Masjid settled down in Ayodhya in the evening of December 6, it was evident that it was not the end in itself. As subsequent developments in India have underscored, the demolition continued to play a major role well after the event. By all accounts, India would continue to grapple with the problem for several years to come...



## CHAPTER 7

# Antimkāṇḍ



*"Don't you know cheats put on masks of  
dharma?"*

*There is still hope.*

*Trust in me.*

*My sword is not a toy,*

*My arrows are not firewood".*

**Laxman to Ram, in Ayodhyakand**

**T**he demolition of the Babri Masjid acted as a catalyst to fundamental change in India. The events of December 6, 1992 figured at the centre of every political debate in India. It was a dominant issue in the election to the assemblies in the four states that were ruled by the BJP before the demolition. There were indications that it would take a long time to exorcise the events from the Indian psyche. At a personal level the change was most acute for the family members of more than 1800<sup>1</sup> people, who had been killed in the two-month-long communal violence following the demolition. There were many others who felt an acute sense of discomfort at the developments in Ayodhya, and their fallout elsewhere. When Muzaffar Ali, a noted Hindi film-maker who has immortalised the city of Lucknow in two of his films *Gaman* and *Umrao Jaan* and had spent a considerable part of his youth there, returned to the city on December 26, 1992 after spending several days in his village, it was a return to a "bruised and changed city".<sup>2</sup> The film-maker traced his evolution through several cities while analysing the basic content of his two films

based on Lucknow. *Gaman*, for Ali, was his "first Lucknow" and was a "documentation of rural and urban society and the predicament of the common man". The city of *Umrao Jaan* was "another Lucknow," and was the result of his urge to document the travails of a "helpless woman in a callous world". However, the city, which helped Ali "give *ghazal* a human form," was faced with a different tragedy after the demolition where "insanity had torn asunder its fine sensitive fabric called culture. Seeds of insecurity and mistrust have been sown in the people bottled up in curfew-ridden *mohallahs*". Ali's observations of the city where he had lived during his formative years were similar to the views expressed by several others.<sup>3</sup> The film-maker was also talking about the decline of a cultural trend, in several towns and cities of India which had traditionally witnessed close interaction between members of the various religious communities. Referred to frequently as the composite culture of the country, it meant members of one religious community adopting rituals of the other community without giving up one's faith. In a way, the tradition underlined the spiritual oneness amongst Indians. This tradition had come under threat in the course of the Ayodhya agitation, as the advocates for the Hindutva idea negated the concept of the composite culture and asserted that the culture of India was predominantly Hindu. In such a situation, where the majority of Hindus slowly started accepting the world view of the RSS clan, returning to the place where one grew up became a painful exercise for the likes of Ali. Lucknow as a city was no longer the picture of communal bonhomie that the film-maker grew up in, which was the reason for his acute discomfort. Lucknow was not the only city that became a victim to the changing value system. The cultural impact of the Ayodhya agitation is also evident in several Islamic shrines in north India, which had been frequented by a large number of Hindus till recently. Now, with the idea of cultural interaction frowned upon, the nature of annual festivals at these shrines, had started changing as Hindus did not turn up in large numbers, as in the past.<sup>4</sup> The change

is especially difficult to rationalise and come to terms with, for those people who grew up with the earlier value systems and who do not adhere to the RSS clan's narrow and singular concept of culture.

For a large number of Indians who were less than jubilant at the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a bit of India had died on December 6, 1992. For Muslims, the experience was particularly traumatic not only because of the demolition, but for the impact that the development would have on Indian polity.

A rare first person account by a Muslim journalist in the English media, is particularly revealing for both the ringside view that he had of the Ayodhya agitation and for the fact that he did not share the majority Muslim view, before the demolition. A person who, "even two days before the demolition," was telling his editor that "December 6 will pass off without any damage to the mosque,"<sup>5</sup> while explaining how he had behaved like the proverbial ostrich, he elaborated on how he had always maintained that "India shall never become Pakistan". A person, who had initially maintained that the Muslims "should make a gesture towards Hindus and hand over the structure to them," he had to face the ignominy of being detained by the police during a communal riot in Allahabad in 1987. This was in spite of his protestations that he was a journalist. Even as he saw the Babri Masjid "become full time politics," with the "Sangh brotherhood and the BMAC lined up opposite each other," the journalist "was convinced that things would improve". The account of the journalist is of great importance, because he was not representative of the majority Muslim view that the Babri Masjid must be restored to the community. However, the demolition of the mosque transformed even his viewpoint. Though the mosque did not mean anything for him personally for the time it existed, the situation changed after December 6, 1992 and he noted that while watching the "rubble of the once-abandoned Babri Masjid on my television, tears began to roll down my cheeks. And I realised how a decrepit mosque in

Ayodhya had become a symbol of identity for millions of Muslims". The journalist was not alone in his view that the Muslims had lost something of great symbolic value with the demolition. A non-partisan commentator also conceded that the "destruction of the Babri Masjid had deeply wounded the religious feelings of the Muslim community throughout India".<sup>6</sup> The journalist's account of his sentiment after the demolition of the mosque has historical importance also, if only because it served to underline that the consciousness of belonging to a particular religious community, had percolated to the intellectual elite of India also. A large number of Muslims in the media, academics, arts and other intellectual professions, had pursued their vocation oblivious of the fact that they were Muslims, and were thus compelled to react differently to contemporary events. In many instances they had become either agnostics or atheists, and even in religious disputes, their opinion had little to do with their religious identity. This had begun to change after the Ayodhya agitation gathered momentum. It only became a permanent feature after the demolition. The fact that a leading news magazine decided to throw open one of its pages so that a Muslim journalist could express his viewpoint as a Muslim, is indicative of the acceptance by the system of the evolution of a separate Muslim opinion as distinct from the earlier non-partisan viewpoint. What had been demolished in Ayodhya, for the educated Muslims, was not just a mere structure that had been used as a mosque before the idols were forcibly installed in 1949, but a symbol had been demolished. The Babri Masjid had symbolised the right of the Muslims to live with dignity in India, where no injustice would be done to them. With the demolition, each Muslim was made acutely conscious of the fact that he was a Muslim first and an Indian later. It was a reversal of the attitude that had prevailed amongst the majority of Muslims, especially the educated, before the demolition.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid marked the end of a phase of history that in one way had started with the VHP incorporating the



Ram temple demand in its agenda in March 1984. In other respects, it marked the end of a phase that had started in 1925, with the formation of the RSS. After spending nearly seventy years on the side trying to propagate the Hindutva idea, the RSS clan found itself close to realising its dream of fostering its world view on the majority of Indians. It was not just the demolition of the mosque that was being endorsed by a vast number of Hindus, but of greater import, was the overt endorsement of a broader set of issues raked up during the course of the Ayodhya agitation. The widespread communal riots that followed the demolition, are vivid testimony to this endorsement that Muslims in this country have to now live with a "transformed set of realities".<sup>7</sup> The reality being that the majority of Hindus now believed that Muslims could no longer demand special rights on account of their minority status. They would have to first "merge their identity with the mainstream,"<sup>8</sup> before expecting any constitutional protection. Being a Muslim in India had always been difficult after the creation of Pakistan, it had only become tougher. It had also become tough to be a secular Hindu willing to disagree with the world view of the RSS clan.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid, marked the end of a historical phase in realpolitik. Not only did the Union government disregard "its constitutional obligations in not preventing the mosque's destruction,"<sup>9</sup> but as successive developments continued to prove on several occasions, it failed to evolve a coherent political strategy to politically counter further damage to Indian polity, from the continued onslaught of the RSS clan. In fact, the Union government even failed to "soothe the injured feelings"<sup>10</sup> of the Muslims. It has been pointed out by a legal expert, that the Prime Minister falsely sought protection by claiming that the Centre could not have prevented the demolition because constitutionally "the Centre could intervene only after imposition of President's rule,"<sup>11</sup> in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The argument is open handed: "Had our Prime Minister paid a little less attention to political expediency and a little more to our Constitution,

he would have realised that our Constitution had armed the Union with ample powers to prevent national catastrophes blowing up in any state of India". The main contention of the Union government regarding its refusal to dismiss the state government of Uttar Pradesh prior to the demolition has been, that it could not take unilateral action in the wake of the assurance given by the state government to the Supreme Court. This was namely that it would not violate the orders of the Court and that only "symbolic kar seva" would be allowed. In a way it was a convenient position which suggested that a section of the Union government was not averse to the demolition of the mosque. When the state government was dismissed several hours after the demolition of the mosque, the Union government acted by invoking Article 356 of the Constitution, which states that President's rule can be promulgated in any state if the "President, on receipt of a report from the Governor of the state or otherwise, is satisfied that a situation has arisen in which the government of the State cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution".<sup>12</sup> President's rule was thus imposed in the state of Uttar Pradesh because following the demolition, the BJP-controlled Council of Ministers in the state had failed in its basic constitutional obligation of ensuring that the order of the Supreme Court was not violated. The Union government thus could not trust the state government to discharge other constitutional responsibilities which is why the order was promulgated.

However, an expert legal opinion points out that the Union government had erred in not resorting to the use of Article 355 of the Constitution, and thus was guilty of failing to discharge its constitutional responsibilities. Article 355 of the Constitution categorically states: "It shall be the duty of the Union to protect every state against external aggression and internal disturbance and to ensure that the government of every State is carried on in accordance to the provisions of this Constitution".<sup>13</sup> It has been argued that while Article 355 thrust upon the Union, the

responsibility to protect every state from both "external aggression" and "internal disturbance", the following Article of the Constitution "provides for the consequence of a state not being carried on in accordance with the provisions of our Constitution".<sup>14</sup> It has been argued therefore that while the Union government acted after the state government failed to protect the state from internal disturbance, the Union did not act to protect the state of Uttar Pradesh, even though there were manifest indications of internal disturbance. In its defence, the Union government has resorted to the weak argument that Article 355 of the Constitution had not previously been invoked by any Union government. Even at best, this is a thin veil for its political inability and lack of real motivation to prevent the demolition.

The Union government's failure to act in accordance with the Constitution was evident not just prior to the demolition, but also on several occasions thereafter. The attack on the Babri Masjid started minutes before noon on December 6, and the Union government was apprised of the development through its intelligence network. However, the cabinet meeting was convened only at 6 P.M. that evening<sup>15</sup>, which in effect meant that there was a deathly conspiratorial silence from the Union government, while the kar sevaks were demolishing the mosque. Finally, President's rule was imposed in the State, but this led to no improvement in the ground reality in Ayodhya. An inquiry report states that "From about noon on December 6 to early morning on December 8, there was a power vacuum in Ayodhya".<sup>16</sup> The vacuum was caused by the transfer of the local officials and the fact that the "new Divisional Commissioner and Senior Superintendent of Police only arrived on the night of December 7 and the morning of December 8 respectively". Moreover, the declaration of President's rule "did not result in swift action by the Central forces, to clear the kar sevaks from the Babri Masjid site area or stop the latter's criminal activity".<sup>17</sup> The criminal activity after the demolition of the mosque was two-pronged: Constructing a makeshift temple-like structure;

and attacking the life and property of Muslims of Ayodhya. The Union government has made contradictory claims regarding the delay in clearing the area of kar sevaks. While at one place it has contended that the timing of entry in the area was left to the security forces because of the tense situation and the belligerent mood of the kar sevaks, at another place, they reckoned that "it would be preferable to send the security forces on the night of 7-8 December".<sup>18</sup> In the aftermath of the demolition of the mosque, the Union government continued with the policy of the state government. This meant not resorting to force in preventing the kar sevaks from continuing their illegal activity. A panel of independent scholars perused evidence relating to the demolition and suggested that the evidence "squarely points to the clear failure of the Central government to fulfill its constitutional obligations. Whether this was due to a failure of judgment, or its own perceived political interests, is not possible for us to judge".<sup>19</sup> The fact remains, though that by the time the disputed site had been cleared of kar sevaks and security forces taken control much of the debris had been taken away by the dispersing kar sevaks, a makeshift structure had by then been built over and the idols had been reinstalled. By the morning of December 8 it became obvious that the Union government had colluded in the cementing of the makeshift structure. This ensured that its continued presence would emerge as the main issue in the temple-town eclipsing the idea of rebuilding the mosque. Nothing underlined this more than a photograph prominently printed in newspapers on December 9. The picture, taken the previous morning shortly after the security forces gained control of the site, showed two constables of the CRPF paying obeisance to the idols kept inside the makeshift structure. The picture was in complete contrast from the images of the time when policemen stood on guard inside the mosque to ward off trouble by mischief makers. Like other wings of the State machinery, the role of the security forces had been completely reversed.

Predictably, the demolition of the Babri Masjid evoked sharp

reactions in political circles as well as among the people. While rioting erupted in several towns and cities of India, there was a sense of outrage in the Islamic world. In Pakistan, the United Kingdom and many other countries, instances were reported of attacks on Hindu temples. A total of 240 temples, two gurudwaras, and one church were attacked and damaged in Pakistan. In Bangladesh, 305 temples, 1,300 houses and 270 commercial establishments belonging to the minority Hindus were either damaged or destroyed. In the United Kingdom, 18 temples and cultural centres were damaged, while in Afghanistan four temples and three gurudwaras were attacked by people protesting against the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The anger in the Islamic world was understandable in the sense that the Babri Masjid was now perceived as a symbol of identity for Muslims in India. In failing to prevent its demolition the Union government failed to protect the identity of Muslims in India. The political reaction in India among the adversaries of the RSS was one of outrage and anger. All non-BJP opposition parties called for punitive action against the leaders of the RSS clan. These parties were joined by several members of the ruling party, including several Union Ministers. The Prime Minister maintained that he had been betrayed by the leaders of the RSS clan as they had promised him that kar seva would be a peaceful programme and the Babri Masjid would not be damaged. Critics of the Prime Minister inside the party and in other non-BJP opposition parties predictably called for his resignation, for turning a convenient Nelson's eye to the plans of the RSS clan.

The Union government on its part, acted in fits and bursts. Forced into action by various contrasting postures, the Prime Minister initiated punitive action against the RSS clan and its leaders. The RSS, VHP, and Bajrang Dal were banned along with the Muslim fundamentalist Islamic Sevak Sangh and the Jamaat-e-Islami. Several leaders of the banned organisation along with senior BJP leaders like L.K. Advani, Uma Bharti and Murli Manohar Joshi were detained as were VHP leader Ashok Singhal

and Bajrang Dal chief Vinay Katiyar. However, the arrests were made on a clumsily filed FIR that was doomed not to hold much water with the judiciary. This was demonstrated later when a local court ordered the release of the arrested leaders. Similarly, the order banning the RSS was not framed skillfully and was subsequently struck down by a special Tribunal appointed to examine the ban order. From the time the RSS clan started exhibiting signs of their plan to demolish the Babri Masjid, the Union government made half-hearted attempts to foil the plans of the BJP, and other RSS affiliates. This approach was in continuation of the Union government's previous policy, and even after it became evident that the RSS clan was gaining from the soft stance of the government, there was no attempt to reverse the policy.

It has been widely alleged that the failure of the Union government to take strong pre-emptive steps before the demolition and a planned political offensive against the RSS, is largely because of the perceived softness of the Prime Minister towards the Hindutva idea.<sup>20</sup> On several occasions the actions of the Prime Minister have suggested that while he and his supporters within the Congress party are not averse to building the temple at Ayodhya as per the plan of the VHP, it did not wish to allow the RSS clan to reap political benefits from the action.<sup>21</sup> In a way, this was indicative of the success of the RSS in popularising the Hindutva idea. While political adversaries of the BJP could continue with their slanging match, the parties nevertheless had to declare that they were not opposed to the Ram temple being built at the disputed site. The Congress, no longer a one-leader party after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, witnessed increased internal wranglings after the demolition of the mosque primarily on the question of the Prime Minister perceived softness towards the RSS clan. This led to further growth of the BJP and other RSS affiliates. While the government floundered, the resolve of the BJP to carry the battle beyond the demolition was solidifying. By the middle of 1993, the BJP had started making predatory

moves in preparation for a final assault on the citadel of power in India.

The initial reaction of the RSS clan to the demolition was one of disbelief. L.K. Advani, a witness to the deed expressed regret and sadness. He tendered his resignation as leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha saying that he was "sorry that I could not prevent"<sup>22</sup> the demolition. The first response of the leaders of the RSS clan stationed in Delhi on December 6 was that the demolition had not been carried out by its supporters, but that the detractors of the Hindutva movement had precipitated the action with a view to discredit the VHP and its allies.<sup>23</sup> The private secretary of Balasaheb Deoras, the RSS *sarsanghchalak*, even suggested that the demolition had been organised by a "secret agency of the government".<sup>24</sup> With reports and photographs showing that a large number of BJP and VHP leaders had been jubilant while witnessing the demolition, it became increasingly apparent that the RSS clan was both divided and on the defensive. This was a short aberration, for the decision to simultaneously ban the RSS and its allies and then to arrest its key leaders cemented the fissures within the clan. In just a few days after the demolition, aggression was once again evident on the facade of the RSS and its allies. With the Union government finally bowing to the pressure of the strong anti-BJP sentiment within the party, it decided to dismiss the BJP-governed Ministries in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. The BJP found itself in the position that it enjoyed best one of "splendid isolation".<sup>25</sup>

From the second week of December, the destruction of the mosque was justified. The main argument put forward was quite simplistic: The demolition "would have been easily avoided had the Central government cooperated with the government of Uttar Pradesh in trying to obtain an early decision from the Lucknow High Court".<sup>26</sup> The argument was that the High Court was looking into the case regarding the state government's decision to acquire 2.77 acres of disputed land at Ayodhya. Since

the VHP had already acquired ownership of a major part of this land and property, prior to the acquisition by the state government, even if the Court struck down the acquisition order, the kar seva programme could proceed legally. The Union government was roundly criticised for its "calculated strategy to use courts to thwart kar seva".<sup>27</sup> Other adversaries were accused for their "provocative speeches"<sup>28</sup> that "set the stage for an emotive outburst".<sup>29</sup>

At no point however, was there an attempt to explain why the VHP did not postpone the kar seva programme. The argument was merely a continuation of the RSS approach that only the time schedules it had laid out were of any consequence. Other political forces could be expected to alter position and change deadlines, but the RSS clan had no obligation to shift from its announced posture.

Even though the main leaders of the BJP were under detention, the second-ranking leaders embarked on an offensive drive and called for an intensification of the agitation to seek early elections in the four states that had been governed by the BJP before the demolition. A virtual war council was set up in the absence of the top leadership. The fact that the RSS clan had consistently shifted its stance on the Ayodhya issue was again underlined when the party claimed that while the construction of the proposed temple would be carried out "the idols can be temporarily shifted".<sup>30</sup> This was in variance to the VHP position during the negotiations in 1989 and later, that the sanctum sanctorum of the temple must be at the precise spot where the idols were placed because they "could not be shifted".<sup>31</sup> By the end of December 1992, it was clear that the BJP was keen to capitalise on the Hindu euphoria generated by the removal of the mosque. Although the defensive face of the party that had been visible in the immediate aftermath of the demolition, this was soon replaced with a brazen one. A senior party leader, writing his signed editorial in the official organ of the BJP emphatically declared that the demolition of the Babri Masjid had



"put a full stop to the issue".<sup>32</sup> He likened the demolition to the "pulling down of the Berlin Wall," and declared that the "New World Order will be based on Faith, not divorced from Reason". Read in the backdrop of other assertions of the leaders of the RSS clan, it was not in doubt that the 'Faith' would be Hindu and nothing else. Another senior RSS leader, while reacting to the anger sweeping the Islamic world declared that "if the Islamic countries dare to wage a 'jihad' they will get the answer they got from the Jews. Last time in 1947, we surrendered to them mainly because there was a third power in between. This time the Hindus are more awakened and organised. There will be no surrender".<sup>33</sup> The aggressive face of the BJP was also starkly evident during L.K. Advani's press conference, following his release in the second week of January. By then it was clear that the BJP and other RSS affiliates had decided to shed all pretensions of tolerance. There was no doubt now that if the BJP came to power, the country would be governed according to the dictates of the party leadership.

The changed global order also came in handy for the RSS clan. With the collapse of the communist bloc and the end of the Cold War, the western powers now perceived the Islamic world as their new *bete noire*. Historically, it was like a return to the time of the Crusades or 'Holy Wars' where Christianity and Islam were bitterly ranged against each other. In a situation of conflict between the Christian and Islamic worlds, a Zionist Israel and a Hindu India could only be seen as natural allies of the western world, for they all now had a common enemy. This idea was apparent in the RSS clan. A senior leader stated that the BJP strategy in the southern state of Kerala which has over 40 per cent Muslim voters, to "gain a foothold"<sup>34</sup> they would have to concentrate on constituencies where Syrian Christians along with Hindus could be swayed. In many ways, the shape of things in an India governed by the RSS in the guise of the BJP should they come to power, would resemble a Zionist state. The parallels of approach of the BJP and Zionist Israel was very evident during

the visit of the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister, Shimon Peres, to India in May 1993. At the traditional meeting between him and the Leader of the Opposition, L.K. Advani, the Israeli leader suggested that India should tackle the Kashmir problem the way the Israelis had found a solution to the problem in the West Bank: Organise government-aided Hindu colonisation of Muslim majority Kashmir, and thereby radically alter the demographic character of the region.<sup>35</sup>

In a likely future scenario in India ruled by the BJP, it is likely that there would be striking similarities between India and Israel. Differences within the RSS clan would surface every now and then but not over the parameters of the debate. This is indicated by the differences that have periodically surfaced regarding tactical strategies. Atal Behari Vajpayee has frequently expressed his unease with the single-minded devotion with which the BJP has pursued the Ayodhya agitation. Nevertheless, he has never questioned the basic intent of the agitation. There have been differences between Murli Manohar Joshi, L.K. Advani and others over the manner in which the Hindu clergy should be involved in the political process. The differences would certainly remain, and continue to surface even if the BJP came to power at the Centre. The moot point is however, that the parameters of the debate within the RSS clan is restricted and there is no contradiction in the basic understanding that the position of Hindus is supreme and Hinduism is the guiding principle of India. The situation is similar to the political reality in Israel, where there are opposing parties that battle it out during elections. However, the parameters of the Zionist state are never questioned. If the BJP comes to power in India, India would be a closed society in political terms.

For starters, India will have a new name: Hindudesh. The change is considered necessary because India is "an English word, not an Indian or Hindu word," and the advocate of the idea sees no reason "to identify" himself with "foreigners". The argument, published in the organ of the RSS barely a few weeks after the

demolition of the Babri Masjid,<sup>36</sup> is indicative of the structure of society perceived in the country if the BJP came to power. The word India is foreign which is why the name of the country has to be changed, and to stop Indians from identifying themselves with a foreign concept. So what should be the new name, the ideologue asks. Options are discussed. Bharat is ruled out as the new name because the citizens would be called Bharatis and it "sounds like a surname, not the name of a nationality". The attempt thus would be to "find a *pucca Bharati* word to describe ourselves and our country". For several generations, India has also been referred as Hindustan. The term has been used by poets, novelists, politicians. But the advocate of the argument to rename India is "not happy with it either". The reason is simple enough: "There are too many 'stans' around us and they have an Islamic, not Hindu connotation. And what would be the term for a citizen of Hindustan? A Hindustani, like Hindustani music? No I would rather have a term with a pure Hindu sound". The alternative name proposed is thus Hindudesh as it is "distinct from the 'stans' around us, particularly those with Islamic or Russian connotation". With India renamed Hindudesh, the nationality of citizens would be Hindu and "this will solve many problems. Since everybody will be a Hindu, there can be no minorities, for it is absurd to think that in Hindudesh, there can be a Hindu majority and a Hindu minority". The argument is at one level ludicrous, but at the other level it exposes the strategy to settle the issue of minorities in the country. "When everybody is a Hindu there can be no problems, which arise only when you say that you are an Indian, not a Hindu. If you are an Indian, you can be an Indian Muslim, or a Muslim Indian. But if you are a Hindu national, you cannot be a Hindu Muslim, or a Muslim Hindu". However, even the advocate of the renaming India as Hindudesh is aware of the opposition to the idea. How does the RSS clan propose to deal with opposition. The critics, if they do not like the idea of being described as Hindus in their passports "can lump it" for Hindudesh and the subsequent decision to call citizens Hindus will become a reality "sooner than he (the critic)

thinks".<sup>37</sup>

The argument regarding the renaming of India was not the only occasion when the intolerant face of the RSS was evident. As a part of the strategy to mobilise support for its demand, that the Ram temple be built at the disputed site (with the sanctum sanctorum located at the place where the idols are installed), and the mosque be rebuilt outside the area traversed by pilgrims during the festive season, the VHP embarked on a massive signature campaign. The programme was envisaged as an opportunity for mass contact,<sup>38</sup> the plan was to collect millions of signatures and submit the memorandum to the President of India. In the course of the programme, RSS activists went from door to door, seeking endorsement from the people during the months of February and March. Naturally, some respondents were unwilling to sign the memorandum and made this plainly understood to the RSS canvassers. This led to some harassment of those people who refused to sign,<sup>39</sup> more importantly it exposed them to the local leaders of the BJP and other RSS affiliates. The programme was actually a very successful public referendum and what's more, made the task of the RSS clan easier. As a result of the campaign they also now had the names of people who were against the Hindutva idea. This meant that in future, the opponents of Hindutva could either be specially targeted, or special efforts made to win them over. The signature campaign and the simple and direct manner in which the RSS identified those opposed to their world view, raised the chilling spectre of a singular and regimented society. Senior leaders of the clan were adamant however, that the programme had not even considered such a vision.<sup>40</sup> Viewed against the backdrop of brutal attacks on journalists and photographers reporting on the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the assurances of the BJP and the RSS fraternity appear to be mere lip service.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent euphoria has served to underline that the RSS clan had made considerable headway in the proverbial battle for the hearts of

the people. On a more sinister level, it was another battle that the RSS clan had fought from its inception, with little success. That, however, began to change after the elections of 1991 when the BJP was voted to power in the four north Indian states. This was when a concerted attempt was begun to indoctrinate the minds of the people. Taking a cue from the proverbial advice to 'catch them young', the state governments began rewriting textbooks for school children. Though a highly controversial step,<sup>41</sup> existing history books were replaced with others that propagated the Hindutva concept of history. Subjects like Vedic mathematics were added to the curriculum. The idea behind the decision was a simple one: The RSS clan believed that the history being taught in school was "distorted and had Marxist and Imperialist interpretations. Children have to be taught true history from the beginning".<sup>42</sup> The decision of the Uttar Pradesh group to replace the textbook led to a protracted dispute with the Union government. Arjun Singh, the Minister overseeing the Education portfolio, had his base in north India and wanted to project himself as the rallying point for the anti-BJP political forces. The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent dismissal of the state governments put an end to the plan to replace the textbooks, but the RSS clan had sensed the advantage of being able to adulterate education and other forms of communication. Inexorably, the next target was culture, as artists and other creative people have historically conveyed political messages through sublime forms.

Barely a few months after the demolition, a cultural commentator noted that the "inevitable is now happening. Culture is rapidly coming under siege. After the Constitution, Parliament and the judiciary, forces of majoritarianism are extending their bullying tactics to areas of culture, art, expression".<sup>43</sup> What had led the commentator to make the observation, was the development of the RSS clan directing the Film Makers' Combine, an apex body of the film industry of India, not to make films which hurt the sensibilities of Hindus. Shortly afterwards, noted theatre

personality Habib Tanvir was targeted by the VHP unit in the United Kingdom during a tour that began in the last week of May 1993. Shortly before Habib Tanvir was to begin his three-week-long performing tour, the VHP unit in the UK told the local organisers that they would not allow the director to stage his plays because the director "spread malicious lies."<sup>44</sup> They insisted that it was the "cardinal duty" of the VHP to prevent this "poison of the propaganda in the name of secular art". The anger of the VHP was invoked by a "highly motivated piece" in a Hindi newspaper published from Delhi that portrayed a "casteist brahminical priest who had no qualms forfeiting his honour before money and lust".<sup>45</sup> The play was not a part of the package that the director was scheduled to stage, but the decision to write the satirical adaptation of a folk play was enough to raise the hackles of the VHP.

This attack on Habib Tanvir followed a concerted bid to govern the kind of films made in India. The Film Makers' Combine, an apex body of all film makers in India, was told to ensure that its members made films which "portray Hindu culture and values; not ridicule Hindu sentiments; artists posing in the nude should be banned from starring in films; members of the film industry should not criticise the Ayodhya movement; and Hindu films must not have Urdu credit titles".<sup>46</sup> There was a further 'dikkat' that rape scenes should not be shown to be taking place in any temple premises. The commentator cited earlier, continued that "factually sanctified brahminism, has for centuries used the temple premises as its play field".<sup>47</sup> But it had no impact on the directive and the FMC "succumbed to the dictates".<sup>48</sup> One stark example of a film script being altered at the behest of the RSS clan is an as yet untitled film being made by producer Satish Khanna. The film "glorifies a character who is a non-Hindu. Khanna now intends to have the script rewritten to project him as a Hindu". The decision to mould the Indian film industry to promote the Hindutva idea was an obvious one for the RSS clan because of the awesome reach of the industry. Successful popular

films in India have traditionally become a part of the contemporary idiom and have even at times, become part of the folklore. While the film industry was under the saffron siege, the commentator observed that the advocates of the Hindutva idea did not "realise that their politics is as fictional as the films that they were busy berating".

The attempt to doctor the kind of cinema being made in India had followed the categorical rejection of the Constitution, by the Hindu clergy associated with the Ayodhya agitation. These religious leaders had asserted that the Constitution violated the "culture, character, situation, and people"<sup>49</sup> of the country. Several months after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, it was evident that virtually all existing institutions were under threat from the RSS clan, and the character of the country would be significantly altered if the BJP came to power at the Centre. The BJP, and the Jana Sangh had repeatedly declared that they were against the Nehruvian model of polity. While portions of it have been dismantled by the Congress government after 1991 with its economic liberalisation drive, the BJP has repeatedly resolved to dismember the remnants of the model, especially where it pertained to the status of minorities. Liberal democratic institutions were under threat, the form and content of the educational system had been questioned, culture was being sought to be moulded into a pliable instrument, and even the Constitution had been rejected. It became apparent that India would be fundamentally altered the moment the RSS clan was voted into power. The bitter irony was that none of the political adversaries exhibited any long-term plan to contain the further growth of the RSS clan. The ruling Congress was beset with internal contradictions, and lack of foresight. Other opposition parties remained fragmented, and short-term aims governed their postures.

The stupefying failure of the Indian system was most evident in Bombay, that had been rocked by unprecedented violence in January when the Shiv Sena, an ally of the BJP openly led organised Hindu mobs and attacked Muslims. The riots which

forced thousand of Muslim migrants to the city to flee their place of dwelling overnight, also witnessed the "most distressing dimension of overt and covert consent of the city's middle class and the upper middle class youth in bestial acts of violence, looting and arson".<sup>50</sup> As a counter to the practice among Muslims to offer *namaz* on Friday afternoons in large numbers, the Shiv Sena floated the concept of *Maha Arti* a public ritual. A police official deposing before a judicial commission probing the riots, declared that people returning from these rituals had the intention to indulge in violence. However, the Indian State made little effort to initiate punitive action against those guilty of organised attacks on Muslims of Bombay. On the contrary, the State virtually shielded the guilty. The apathy of the government was so evident that it forced a commentator to observe that the "persons protesting at the demolition of the Babri Masjid, are shot in the head by the police, but the individual proudly crowing that he demolished the shrine is left untouched; the government takes legal action against a young scholar for writing an academic piece on the lionisation of Shivaji, but ignores the open exhortations by a paper to kill the Muslims; a filmstar possessing a firearm is arrested under a law meant for terrorists, while the man who unabashedly owns responsibility for the January pogrom goes scot-free".<sup>51</sup> The person being mentioned in the comment was the Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray, and the paper mentioned is the official organ of the party and the filmstar mentioned was Sanjay Dutt.

With the Indian State abrogating its duty of protecting Muslims under attack from the Shiv Sena, and other RSS affiliates, it was only a matter of time before matters came to a head. The financial capital was rocked by a well-organised serial bombing in March, leaving many dead and much of debris. While the police investigations linked the episode to a section of the underworld of the city, it also raised visions of Islamic terrorism in India. Planned with great care, the serial bombings were clearly an answer to the January riots as the perpetrators of the bombings were predominantly



**Muslim members of the underworld. The bombing dampened the spirit of the advocates of the Hindutva idea as it now raised visions of an enemy that would be difficult if not impossible to contain. Unlike other fissiparous movements in India, Islamic terrorism, if it became a reality, would be catastrophic as it would not be restricted to a geographical pocket. The Indian State had already after all, demonstrated its inability to counter Sikh terrorism outside of the Punjab. The bombings also served as a dire warning to leading industrialists regarding the possible form of opposition to the rise of the Hindutva idea. The blasts had the desired effect, as moderation became visible among the Hindutva advocates in the aftermath of the bombings.**

**While the serial bombings controlled the venomous outpourings of the Shiv Sena and the RSS clan marginally, it also aided in further political polarisation. Ever since the RSS clan began its climb using the Ayodhya ladder, the BJP and its allies have consistently sent out signals to the Muslims. The message was that they were welcome to live in India in peace, but they had to know their limits and also stay confined within the parameters framed by the clan. These signals were being sent constantly even during violent interludes. The suggestion was that it would be better for the Muslims to come to terms with the emerging stranglehold of the RSS clan, and the Hindutva influence on the body-politic of India, and make peace with it. The inference was that if the Muslims did not come to terms with the emerging reality, they would be taught a lesson.<sup>52</sup> The Bombay riots were and extreme example. It was a indication that the Muslims had no justification in protesting against the demolition of the Babri Masjid and this is why they were being penalised. If the riots sent a signal to the Muslims to "learn to behave," the serial bombing of the city was a signal to the advocates of the Hindutva idea of just what Islamic terrorism was capable of. It had a very sobering effect on the RSS clan, which at last woke up to the fact that the Muslims could not be wished away in one stroke. The bombings caused confusion in the ranks of the BJP and the other**

RSS allies. Barring the standard condemnation, the party failed to evolve a comprehensive analysis of the blasts and the factors that led up to them.<sup>53</sup> Immediately following the incident, the leaders increased the frequency of their call to Muslims, to join their ranks. Appeals were made for Muslims to form an opinion of the RSS clan after personal evaluation, and not be guided by the opinion of its detractors.<sup>54</sup>

The visible confusion in the RSS clan after the serial bombings spilled over to other areas. At the core of their absence of a clear foresight, was the issue of the degree of vehemence to be adopted by the BJP and allies, on the Ram temple issue. While the more boisterous sections wanted to continue the aggressive stance that had led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Bombay riots, other sections wanted to act with restraint. The differences in opinion were also coloured with factionalism that surfaced once again in the BJP. The group led by Murli Manohar Joshi lost out to the group led by L.K. Advani and the former retaliated by attempting to involve the Hindu clergy in a political campaign on the twin issues of use of 'swadeshi' products and a demand for total rejection of the Dunkel Draft on trade agreement. This caused great consternation in the rival group as it raised visions of an Iran-style uprising in India. The BJP's association with it would be detrimental to their international image as a party capable of controlling the forces that it had let loose in the course of the Ayodhya agitation. The differences within the RSS clan however, were only confined to the basic parameter set by the leadership. The impression being that India could evolve into a state similar to Israel, where different parties existed, had differences, but remained committed to the Zionist character of the State.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid was not the last upheaval witnessed by India. There was more political melodrama to follow when Harshad Mehta, the key accused in the country's biggest ever financial scam accused the Prime Minister of accepting a bribe of one crore rupees. The allegation was made when the Joint

Parliamentary Committee, formed to investigate the manner in which large amounts of public funds was surreptitiously used in the security market, opened the Pandora's Box. There were allegations that stock broker Harshad Mehta had been set up by the BJP leadership, after promising to reduce charges against him when the party came to power.<sup>55</sup> The irregularities in the security market and the Mehta allegation, was the biggest financial scandal to hit India since the ongoing Bofors scandal which was instrumental in discrediting Rajiv Gandhi. There was a significant difference, however, in the campaign against Rajiv Gandhi and the one mounted against P.V.Narasimha Rao. While in the late 1980s the campaign was primarily led by V.P. Singh and other centrist opposition parties, with the BJP riding piggy back on the Janata Dal-led conglomerate, in 1993, the BJP was keen to have the lion's share of the anti-corruption campaign. Traditionally, anti-corruption platforms have been populist in India, and seldom have politicians succeeded in emerging unscathed in the people's court, even though charges may not have stuck legally. The BJP had to play second fiddle to the centrist opposition parties in the campaign against Rajiv Gandhi primarily because it was only a small peripheral political party in the mid-1980s. By 1993, the situation had altered considerably for the BJP was now the second largest political party in Parliament and was poised to make even more inroads in the next Parliamentary elections. The BJP opted to take the lead on the corruption issue and declared that the "ruling party's failure to answer the grave allegations made against the highest in the land,"<sup>56</sup> was indicative of the paralysis gripping the Congress. By the time the BJP resolved some of its internal conflicts, and had partially set its house in order by re-electing L.K. Advani as president of the party, the stage had been set for the final assault by the BJP. The same strategy had been used earlier in 1989, but at that time the platform was shared with centrist opposition parties. This is not the case in 1993 and the BJP along with the other RSS affiliates, did not feel the need for outside allies. The mix of issues however, still remains the same. The Ram temple issue continues

to dominate the political plank of the RSS clan. Neatly dovetailing into this is the issue of a corrupt government and the promise that given a chance, the BJP will remove material as well as spiritual ills. The concept of Ram Rajya reigns supreme in the list of BJP's promises. There were no remnants of the bonhomie between the Prime Minister and the BJP, as witnessed immediately after the 1991 elections. For the BJP and the other RSS clones, it was time to prepare for the final assault. It was expected to be a protracted no-holds-barred battle. Nothing symbolised this better than the re-election of L.K. Advani as the president of the party. The decision to give him another tenure was reminiscent of 1986 when the BJP consciously shed its liberal facade and revealed its hard Hindu face. The re-elected BJP president also lived up to his image as a person who did not mince words regarding the view of the party. Immediately after donning the mantle of the chief storm trooper, he likened the demolition of the Babri Masjid to the mythical incineration of Lanka by Hanuman after he had been despatched there by Ram, to locate the abducted Sita. The metaphor offered by Advani, was that even though Hanuman had not been given the specific brief to burn Lanka, he had acted on his own after seeing Sita confined. Advani contended that this was similar to the action of the kar sevaks who had demolished the Babri Masjid without being specifically directed to do so. The argument was that if Hanuman had not been condemned for the burning of Lanka, the kar sevaks also should not be criticised for the demolition. This was a neat dovetailing of mythology into contemporary politics, and underlined the manner in which the RSS clan has used religion and related motifs, to justify their political actions. The response of the Indian State also combined similar elements as the Prime Minister likened his plight, after the allegation of accepting a bribe, to that of Sita forced to undergo the fire test because Ram doubted her chastity. L.K. Advani also reacted strongly to the move of the Union government to enact a legislation, that would prevent the use of religion in politics.

The BJP president declared that in India, religion could not

be delinked from politics because religion formed the ethical core of the country.<sup>57</sup> It went without saying, of course, that the BJP leader was talking about Hinduism as being the basis of ethics in India. Other faiths had no relation to any tradition of India. The BJP thus began preparing for a final push that would thrust them up the citadel of power in India. Whether the strategy would meet with success or not, is a drama still to unfold, there is no doubt that the RSS clan has emerged as one of the most significant political forces in India and the world would have to contend with it.

These are surely not the last lines to be written on Ayodhya and the continuing growth of the RSS clan and the other advocates of the Hindutva idea. This is particularly true for even Advani said that the process of political polarisation between the BJP and its political adversaries, is yet incomplete. The assertion has been underscored by the fact that all non-BJP parties did not forge electoral ties in the elections for the assemblies in the four states that were governed by the BJP before the demolition of the Babri Masjid. This would suggest that the RSS clan would continue with the style of politics that ensured their rise as a dominant political force. With India currently on a dangerous road with many twists and turns, the future developments are difficult to foresee. Personally, for me, it has been quite a journey since the time I decided to write this book. While tracing the events and analysing the manner and the factors that led to the rise of the RSS clan, large portions have appeared at times both fictional and surreal. In a way, much of what has happened in India has appeared unreal. There is a parallel I often draw linking the phase of history that started with the Bofors scandal, to the decline of the Mughal empire. There is at least one strong comparison: A weak Centre and the 'crown' being worn by a string of 'kings.'

I have been greatly pained at the changing character of Indian polity and can only hope that romanticism does not disappear permanently from the Indian political theatre and that Indians

**continue to chase abstract fantasies and not a totalitarian system where intolerance is the catchword and the negation of Indian pluralistic traditions is the golden rule...**



# NOTES





## RĀMKĀND

1. L.K. Advani, preface to the BJP's White Paper on Ayodhya & Ram Temple Movement, 1993. He wrote: "Sri Ram is the unique symbol, the unequalled symbol of our oneness, of our integration, as well as of our aspiration to live higher values. As *Maryada Purushottam*, Sri Ram has represented for thousands of years, the ideal of conduct, just as Ram Rajya has always represented the ideal of governance".
2. These formulations are based on the Critical Edition of The Ramayan: The Valmiki Ramayan, Critically Edited for the First Time, 7 vols, G.H. Bhatt & V.P. Shah, Baroda, 1960-75.
3. J.L. Brockington, *The Righteous Rama: The Evolution of an Epic*, OUP, 1984.
4. Bhatt and Shah, op. cit.
5. Sukumar Sen, *Origin and Development of the Rama Legend*, Rupa, 1977. Also Brockington, op. cit.
6. Herman Jacobi, *Das Ramayan*, quoted by Brockington, op. cit.
7. Namita Bhandare, Louise Fernandes, Sunday, February 21-27, 1993.
8. Ibid.
9. Sukumar Sen, op. cit.
10. Brockington, op. cit.
11. Ibid.
12. Brockington, op. cit. His postulations are based on exhaustive research and has been drawn from primarily and a majority of secondary sources. The subsequent arguments are largely based on Brockington's work.
13. Sukumar Sen, op. cit.
14. Brockington, op. cit.
15. Ibid.

## AYODHYĀKĀND

1. Interview with Hasan Zaheer, elderly Muslim resident of Ayodhya; February 6, 1993.
2. The local administration also issued show-cause notices to Muslims for having rebuilt their houses without getting the plan approved by it; reply of P.M. Sayeed, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, to question put by Syed Shahabuddin, August 26, 1993.
3. Sunil Raman, *The Economic Times*; February 15, 1993.
4. Shikha T. Iyedi, *Manushi*; November-December, 1992.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with Hashim Ansari; February 6, 1993.

8. Ibid.
9. R. Narayan, *The Economic Times*; June 6, 1993.
10. Sushil Srivastava, *The Disputed Mosque: A Historical Inquiry*, Vistaar Publications; 1991.
11. *Gazetteer of the Province of Oudh*, (ed. W.C. Benet); 1877.
12. Ibid.
13. H.R. Neville, *District Gazetteer of Fyzabad*; 1905.
14. Walter Hamilton, *The East India Gazetteer*, Vol I; 1815.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography & Statistics of Eastern India*.
18. Patrick Carnegey, *A Historical Sketch of Faizabad Tahsil*.
19. Srivastava, op. cit.
20. *Imperial Gazetteer*; 1908.
21. B.B. Lal, *Puratattva*, *Bulletin of Indian Archaeological Society*, No 16; 1985 & 86.
22. Ibid.
23. *Indian Archaeology: 1976-76. A Review of Explorations & Excavations*.
24. Srivastava, op. cit. He has attributed the account to Abdul Rahman Chisti, Mirat-Masudi, 1682, who in turn drew from an earlier work by Mulla Mohammed Ghaznava, a servant of Sultan Mohmud.
25. Neville, op. cit.
26. Carnegey, op. cit.
27. *Oudh Gazetteer*, op. cit.
28. Srivastava, op. cit.
29. Ibid.
30. Romila Thapar and others, *Political Abuse of History*, JNU, 1990.
31. Ibid.
32. Srivastava, op. cit.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ironically, this report was part of the documents submitted by the VHP in 1988 to buttress its claim on the Babri Masjid.

## **RĀJKĀND**

1. *Indian Express*; December 19-20, 1992. In a two-part article, L.K. Advani wrote that December 6, 1992 was "one of the most depressing days" in his life as the "happenings had impaired the reputation of the BJP and the RSS as organisations capable of enforcing discipline".
2. *Organiser*.
3. Walter.K. Andersen & Shridhar.D. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron*:

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh & Hindu Revivalism, Sage Publications; 1988.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Indian National Congress, resolution; June 1934.
7. Mookerji addressed a RSS shakha in Lahore in 1940. He has been quoted by Balraj Madhok, Portrait of a Martyr; 1969.
8. Andersen & Damle, op. cit.
9. Tapan Basu, Pradip Dutta, Tanika Sarkar & others, Khaki Shorts, Saf-fron Flags, Orient Longman; 1993.
10. Interview with M.G. Vaidya, Nagpur; December 1991. He said the meeting to evolve the RSS hierarchy was held on November 9-10, 1929 and Appaji Joshi proposed the concept of following a single leader.
11. Ibid.
12. M.S. Golwalkar, We or Our Nationhood Defined.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Andersen and Damle, op. cit.
16. Ibid.
17. Interview with M.G. Vaidya, op. cit.
18. Andersen & Damle, op. cit.
19. A debate on the RSS role in the accession of Kashmir to India also continued in the Organiser for several weeks in mid-1993. The specific roles played by different activists of the RSS was discussed in this debate.
20. Andersen & Damle, op. cit.
21. Ibid, they cite an interview with Gopal Godse conducted in 1969.
22. Text of Resolution, *Hamari Paanch Nishthayen*, BJP publication; 1980.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Andersen & Damle, Also see Atal Behari Vajpayee's presidential speech, BJP publication.
26. Expanding Horizons: BJP's First Decade, BJP publication; 1990.
27. Many RSS leaders withdrew from party politics arguing that it was a "dirty game". Most noteworthy of those who 'retired' was Nanaji Deshmukh who opted to branch out and work in a backward and rural region in Uttar Pradesh. He however, continued to play an important advisory role in the RSS throughout the 1980s and 1990s.
28. Conversation with K.R. Malkani, BJP vice-president; April 1991.
29. Dharam Sansad, VHP pamphlet; 1982.
30. Hindu Chetna, VHP publication; April, 1986.
31. Interview with Onkar Bhave, VHP organising secretary, central-zone; July 1989.
32. Text of resolution adopted at Dharam Sansad.

33. Interview with Mulayam Singh Yadav; December 1992.
34. Text of resolution, BJP National Executive; February 1982.
35. Ibid.
36. Organiser; April 10, 1983.
37. Atal Behari Vajpayee, presidential address, BJP National Executive, Indore; January 1984.
38. Conversation with VHP leader Mahesh Narain Singh, 1990.
39. Justice Deoki Nandan Agrawal, Shri Ram Janma Bhoomi: A Historical and Legal Perspective; 1989.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Text of resolution; February 2, 1986.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Press statement; February 2, 1986.
48. Times of India; February 10, 1986.
49. Text of letter, Muslim India; March 1986.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Text of Letter.
53. Text of memorandum; February 14, 1986.
54. Ibid.
55. See for details, The Shah Bano Case: Plight of a Muslim Woman, ed B.R. Agrawala, Arnold-Heinemann; 1986.
56. Interview with Javed Habib; February 1991.
57. Letter to all Muslim MPs; February 20, 1986.
58. Press release, Hindu Sangharsh Samiti; February 20, 1986.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. VHP pamphlet; *Musalmanon ko kya karna chahiye*, 1988.
62. Signed editorial, Muslim India; March 1986.
63. Ibid.
64. Syed Shahabuddin, Muslim India; April 1986.
65. Ibid.
66. Bharatiya Jana Sangh: Principles & Policies adopted at XII BJS Plenary session, Vijayawada; January 1965.
67. Bharatiya Jana Sangh: National Policy, BJS Party Documents 1951-1972.
68. Letter dated September 24, 1948, RSS pamphlet, Justice on Trial.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Text of resolution; February 14-15, 1948.
72. Andersen & Damle, op. cit.

73. Text of resolution; August 8-9, 1948.
74. Interview with M.G. Vaidya, op. cit.
75. Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Election Manifesto; 1951.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
86. Following the rise and growth of militancy in Punjab, Kashmir and North Eastern states, the BJP increasingly advocated the case for a stronger Centre.
87. BJP Election Manifesto, op. cit.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Andersen & Damle, op. cit.
91. BJS Election Manifesto; 1954.
92. Ibid.
93. BJS Election Manifesto; 1957.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.
96. BJS Election Manifesto; 1962.
97. BJS Election Manifesto; 1967.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
103. BJS Election Manifesto; 1971.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
106. Text of resolution, January 1980, BJS Party Documents Vol 5.

## NYĀYAKĀND

1. Source material for this chapter are from legal documents and reports and press releases of the Citizens' Tribunal on Ayodhya.

## **PRAHARKAND**

1. Conversation with Kishan Lal Sharma, BJP general secretary, December, 1987.
2. Text of political resolution adopted by BJP national executive, Ahmedabad, October 7-9, 1988.
3. Ibid.
4. L.K. Advani, opening remarks to national executive, Ahmedabad, 1988.
5. Ibid.
6. Report on organisational activities. Presented by Kedar Nath Sahni, party general secretary, to national executive, New Delhi, July 24-26, 1987.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Resolution adopted by BJP central election committee, June 23, 1987.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Text of political resolution, Ahmedabad, op. cit.
16. Two Years of Congress Misrule: A Chargesheet, BJP publication, October, 1986.
17. Ibid.
18. Conversation with Syed Shahabuddin, December, 1986.
19. Presidential address, December 31, 1986. The executive was followed by the national council session which ended on January 4, 1987.
20. Press statement, March, 1987.
21. Ibid.
22. Inderjit Bhadwar, Tania Midha, India Today, June 15, 1987.
23. Askari H. Zaidi, Times of India, May 26, 1987.
24. Asghar Ali Engineer, Meerut: Shame of the Nation, Ajantha Books, 1988.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Bhadwar and Midha, op. cit.
29. Engineer, op. cit.
30. Interview with Syed Abdullah Bukhari, July 1987.
31. The signatories included P.N. Haksar, I.K. Gujral, M.K. Rasgotra, Subhadra Joshi, Badruddin Tyabji, D.R. Goyal.
32. Interview with VHP leader Ganga Sharan Madadgar, July, 1987.
33. One such speech was made in a Delhi locality by VHP leader B.L.Sharma 'Prem' in July, 1987. He later became a BJP MP.

34. Statement issued by Mahant Avidyanath & Dau Dayal Khanna, June 1987.
35. Lok Sabha starred question no 84, dt. 31.7.1987, by Harobhai Mehta and Mohd Mehfooz Ali Khan.
36. Letter to Madhu Dandavate, P. Upendra, P. Kolandaivelu and others, dt October 9, 1987.
37. Interview with Jawed Habeeb, February 1991.
38. Letter to V.P. Singh on August 17, 1987.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. BJP national executive resolution, 'Corruption in High Places', July 24-26, 1987, New Delhi.
42. L.K. Advani, presidential remarks, national executive, New Delhi. July 1987.
43. Home Minister's Buta Singh's note to Rajiv Gandhi.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Text of BMMCC resolution, January 24, 1988. Other statements in the same paragraph are from same source.
47. Letter dt January 25, 1988.
48. Text of VHP resolution, January 14, 1988.
49. Statement of Ashok Singhal while releasing resolution.
50. C. Rajeshwar Rao, Shameem Faizee, Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi Controversy: Dangerous Communal Situation. CPI publication, April, 1989.
51. Indian Express, October 18, 1988.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. VHP pamphlet, Our Pledge, November 1988.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Union Home Minister Buta Singh's note.
58. Statement of Syed Abdullah Bukhari, August 9, 1988.
59. Ibid.
60. Conversation with Abdullah Bukhari, August 11, 1988.
61. Union Home Minister Buta Singh's note, op. cit. The meeting was held on July 30, 1988.
62. Conversation with Syed Shahabuddin, August 8, 1988.
63. Buta Singh's note, op. cit.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Syed Shahabuddin's letter to Buta Singh, October 6, 1988.
67. Buta Singh's note, op. cit.
68. Conversation with Sultan Salahuddin Owaisi, October 30, 1988.

69. Speech of Ahmed Bukhari, November 26, 1988, New Delhi.
70. Note to Rajiv Gandhi, January 4, 1989.
71. Press statement of AIBMAC, January 31, 1989.
72. Conversation with Syed Shahabuddin, February 4, 1989.
73. Rao and Faizee, op. cit.
74. VHP pamphlet, Shila Puja: Ram Mandir ki Oare, March 1989.
75. Bilingual VHP newsletter, Shri Ram Shila Poojan Samachar, September 1989.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. VHP pamphlet, Indraprastha Vishwa Hindu Parishad Dharmayatra, September 1989.
82. Union government background paper prepared by Ayodhya Cell, PMO, September 1992.
83. Conversation with VHP joint secretary, Surya Krishna, September, 1989.
84. Union government background paper, op. cit.
85. L.K. Advani, opening remarks, BJP national executive, June 9-11, 1989, Palampur, Himachal Pradesh. The following quotations are from the same speech.
86. Text of resolution on 'Ram Jannabhoomi' adopted at Palampur.
87. BJP White Paper on Ram Janmabhoomi Temple Movement, 1993.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Harish Khare, Times of India, December 6, 1989.
91. N.J. Nanporia, December 1, 1989, The Independent, Bombay.
92. Sunday Mail, December 3, 1989.
93. Nanporia, op. cit.
94. Ibid.
95. M.V. Kamath, in Expanding Horizons: BJP's First Decade, BJP publication, April, 1990.
96. L.K. Advani's reply to N.T. Rama Rao and V.P. Singh in reply to their plea to secure the BJP's support.
97. Interview with Kamaljeet Rattan, The Economic Times, December 1992. Subsequent assertions of Buta Singh on the issue are also from the same source.
98. BJP White Paper, op. cit.
99. Shri Ram Shila Poojan Geetavali, published by Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti, July 1989.
100. Conversation with Bajrang Dal leader Jayantiyar, November 10, 1989.



101. Press conference addressed by Ashok Singhal, Vishnu Hari Dalmia and Vijaya Raje Scindia.
102. Expanding Horizon's: BJP's First Decade, op. cit.
103. Text of resolution, November 9, 1989, Marg Darshak Mandal.
104. Text of resolution, Ram Janmabhoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti, October 19, 1989.
105. Union government background paper, op. cit.
106. Interview with L.K. Advani in Expanding Horizons: BJP's First Decade, op. cit.
107. Ibid.
108. Press statement of Insaf Party, January 5, 1990.
109. L.K. Advani, opening remarks to BJP national executive, April 6-8, 1990.
110. Ibid.
111. Interview with L.K. Advani, op. cit.
112. Conversation with Congress general secretary K.N. Singh.
113. Text of resolution, Kendriya Margdarshak Mandal.
114. Ibid. A total of seven resolutions were adopted at this two-day meeting.
115. Interview with L.K. Advani, op. cit.
116. L.K. Advani opening remarks to national executive at Madras, July 21-23, 1990.
117. Ibid.
118. BJP White Paper, op. cit.
119. Conversation with J.P. Mathur, August, 1990.
120. L.K. Advani, public speech after entering Delhi during Rath Yatra, October 1990.
121. Ibid.
122. Mulayam Singh Yadav later denied having made the statement, but, his initial silence had caused great damage.
123. L.K. Advani in conversation with journalists, August 1990.
124. Union government background paper, op. cit.
125. BJP White Paper, op. cit.
126. Ibid.
127. Interview with Mulayam Singh Yadav, December 1992.
128. Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags, op. cit.
129. Post card handed over to this writer by Prithipal Singh of Saharanpur to be posted from a 'safe' place outside Faizabad, November, 1990.
130. Conversation with Uma Bharti, December, 1990.
131. Conversation with K. Govindacharya, April, 1991.
132. BJP White Paper, op. cit.
133. Conversation with Arjun Singh, October, 1992.
134. Union government background paper, op. cit.
135. BJP White Paper, op. cit.
136. Ibid.

137. Union Government White Paper on Ayodhya.
138. Conversation with BJP leader J.P. Mathur, March, 1992.
139. Conversation with BJP vice president K.R. Malkani, April, 1992.
140. Union Government White Paper, op. cit.
141. Ibid.
142. Statement of Bal Thackeray, November, 1992.

## ANTIMKĀND

1. Cry The Beloved Country, a People's Union for Democratic Rights publication, Delhi, February 1993.
2. The Pioneer, January 12, 1993.
3. Ibid.
4. The Economic Times, May 25, 1993.
5. Zafar Agha, India Today, December 31, 1992.
6. H.M. Seervai, The Economic Times, April 9, 1993.
7. Interview with VHP leader Acharya Dharmendra, April, 1993.
8. Ibid.
9. Report of the Inquiry Commission, Citizens' Tribunal on Ayodhya, July 1993.
10. Seervai, op. cit.
11. Seervai, op. cit, further quotations in the same section are from the same source.
12. Constitution of India, compiled and edited by P.M. Bakshi, 1990.
13. Ibid.
14. Seervai, op. cit.
15. Report of Inquiry Commission, op. cit.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. This allegation has been levelled even at the highest level inside the Congress party.
21. This became most transparent during the Som Yagna, a ritual organised by Chandraswami, Rao's trouble-shooter and controversial godman. The ritual, held in June 1993, was supported by the government and religious leaders who joined the two day ritual asserted that the Ram temple must be built where the Babri Masjid was located.
22. Letter to Lok Sabha Speaker from Lucknow, December 6, 1992. In the letter, Advani expressed deep regret at the "Happenings at Ayodhya," but the word "deeply" was an afterthought and inserted in the hand written letter later.
23. BJP leader S.S. Bhandari's claim on December 6, 1992 when journalists sought his reaction.

24. *The Statesman*, December 17, 1992.
25. The phrase was coined when attempts first started in February 1990, to politically isolate the BJP.
26. BJP's White Paper on Ayodhya and The Ram Temple Movement.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. S.S. Bhandari, press statement, December 26, 1992.
31. Position of VHP leaders during negotiations in 1990-1991.
32. K.R. Malkani, *BJP Today*, Vol 2, No 1, January 1-15, 1993.
33. *Organiser*, February 7, 1993.
34. Conversation with BJP general secretary Govindacharya, July, 1993.
35. A report on the advice was denied by Advani, but it did not hold much water as the reporter maintained that his report was factually correct.
36. Jay Dubashi, *Organiser*, January 24, 1993.
37. Ibid, previous quotations from the same article.
38. The single-point memorandum read: "We are of the firm opinion that on the site of the Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya, only the temple be re-constructed. A mosque can be constructed outside the Panchkosi Parikarama in Ayodhya".
39. There were several people who have told the author of their arguments with the activists, but for their safety, the names can not be divulged.
40. Conversation with BJP secretary J.P. Mathur, February, 1993.
41. The Union government, especially the human resource development ministry reacted sharply to the move and criticised the Uttar Pradesh government for tampering with the education process.
42. Conversation with K.R. Malkani, June, 1992.
43. Sadanand Menon, *The Economic Times*, May 22, 1993.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Kumkum Chadha, *The Hindustan Times*, May 16, 1993.
47. Menon, op. cit.
48. Chadha, op. cit.
49. Swami Muktanand Saraswati, *Vartaman Indian Samvidhan*, 1992.
50. Arun Sadhu, *Associated News Features*, January 1993.
51. Sumir Lal, *The Pioneer*, May 1, 1993.
52. K.S. Sudarshan, joint general secretary, RSS, stated that "Muslims must merge and mingle with Motherland," *The Organiser*, March 21, 1993.
53. In various statements, the leaders of the RSS clan merely condemned the bombings.
54. L.K. Advani, in Warangal, July 1993.
55. The allegations appeared to have some substance as Pramod Mahajan, BJP general secretary gave details to journalists in Bangalore of the

**allegation, before its was levelled. Later, the BJP leadership stated that Mahajan had guessed correctly.**

**56. Press statement by L.K. Advani, July 8, 1993.**

**57. Advani's comment at the press conference, July 8, 1993.**

## POSTSCRIPT

The political scenario in India altered in December 1993, after the results of the elections to the Legislative Assemblies in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and the National Capital Territory of Delhi, were declared. The BJP no longer appeared to be a party whose march to power can not be halted, as it had seemed when the elections were ordered. While its defeat in Himachal Pradesh was greatly due to localised issues that cropped up when the BJP governed the state, in Uttar Pradesh, the party stumbled over the main deterrent to Hindu consolidation: Caste fissures in Hindu society. In Madhya Pradesh, the unpopular BJP government, and the emergence of near political bipolarity was the main reason behind the party's failure to recapture power. It was also demonstrated that with the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the RSS clan lost a symbol, that it used, to mount the 'hate campaign' against Muslims. It was ironical that if the Muslims had lost their 'symbol of identity', the BJP and other RSS allies also lost a 'potent instrument' in their search for power in India. The setback received by the BJP is however not reason enough for complacency to set in among the adversaries of the RSS clan as it has overcome such setbacks in the past. The increase in the number of votes cast in favour of the BJP indicated that more than 40 per cent of the Hindus cast their lot with the BJP and endorsed its strident pro-Hindu, anti-Minorities approach. The uneasy caste-alliance that was reached in Uttar Pradesh was a pointer to India continuing to remain in the state of flux, that began with allegations of financial irregularities being levelled against Rajiv Gandhi.

*With the Union government unable, and probably unwilling,*

to force the pace of investigations against the leaders of the RSS clan, charged with conspiring and planning the demolition, it was left to the Citizens' Tribunal on Ayodhya to deliver the first-ever 'judgement', since Independence, on the protracted legal imbroglio. Continuing the tradition of Bertand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and others — of non-official tribunals — the three retired judges of the Supreme and High Courts, found several leaders of the RSS clan guilty of participating in a "deep laid plan" to demolish the Babri Masjid. The Union government was also accused of passive participation in the act. The indictment was severe as it came from honoured judges — part of the Indian State till recently — who said that that their commitment was solely to the Constitution and the people of India. The judgement also highlighted the failure of the Indian judiciary to expedite the legal process: If a 'parallel' judicial body could deliver its judgement expeditiously without much infrastructure, why could not the 'official' judiciary do the same? Nevertheless, the judgements on all the case and references have to be made at some point and they would have great bearing on the future of Indian polity.

The basic issues that surfaced in the course of the Ayodhya agitation are yet to be resolved. The process of political churning in India is poised to go on for several years. While writing this book, a poem written by the eminent poet, Umashankar Joshi, now no more, was brought to my notice. The more it was recited and explained — the poem is in Gujarati, a language that I do not understand much — the more I felt that though written by the poet in the context of superpower rivalry, it was still relevant in the prevailing Indian political reality. All rivalries involve needless combat and the uninvolved audience wonders if it will ever end. The feeling was only refurbished as events kept unfolding. Our search began for someone who could do an appropriate translation. We checked with Rajmohan Gandhi, member of Parliament, and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. He guided us to the doorstep of the poet's daughter, Svati Joshi.

It was a nostalgic evening for her and my wife, Harsha: While one had played with the toy (described in the poem), brought for her when young; the other had cherished the poem and admired the poet's works since school. The poet's daughter informed that Umashankar Joshi had written the poem in May 1953, after his return from China. There is nothing more apt than concluding this book with the lines of Umashankar Joshi, translated into English by his daughter.

### These Superpowers of This World

I have brought a toy from Singapore with me.

Two boxers I have tied up in a paper bag  
and kept under my arm.

One has blue, the other red, shorts;

Both are standing on wheels, sleeves rolled up;

The key is beneath them.

I wound the toy, let them loose, at once began jostling:

"Here you are!" "Take it back!" — goes on.

You laugh, bemused.

Now the red withdraws, there the blue looks fagged out;

Trading blows with great gusto, banging heads  
and getting upset.

Moving backward, rushing forward,

At last settling where they were.

When the toy unwinds, in vain, they sway their arms,

Swing where they stand.

Will superpowers of this world never unwind?

Or, as we wind this toy again and again,

Will you too, God, do the same?